Teen And Up Audiences

Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Gen
M/M

Don't Hug Me I'm Scared (Webseries)

Duck/Red Guy (Don't Hug Me I'm Scared)
Duck & Red Guy & Yellow Guy (Don't Hug Me I'm Scared)

Duck (Don't Hug Me I'm Scared)
Red Guy (Don't Hug Me I'm Scared)
Yellow Guy (Don't Hug Me I'm Scared)

Slice of Life
Families of Choice
Unconventional Families
Food as a Metaphor for Love
Family Dinners
Arguing
Canon-Typical Behavior
Making Up
Past Child Abuse
(only mentioned in passing)
Father Figures
Mutual Pining
fluffybird slow burn in full effect now
headbutting as a form of endearment
Birthday Presents
Surprise Party
Planning Adventures
Domestic Fluff
Family Bonding
Fluff and Humor
Banter
Flirting
riling up your best friend as a weirdo form of flirtation
They're stupid your honor
Idiots in Love

English ← Previous Work Part 5 of home is where I want to be, but I guess I'm already there IM DEALING WITH IT

I am getting older but I am not growing up

LittleMeowMeowEnjoyer

Summary:

“Do I have a birthday?” Yellow suddenly asks the room at large, focus laser-locked on his last fish finger, carefully separating the white flakes of flesh to tease out flimsy bones, crunching happily on the osseous bits of spine he could

find.

"What?"

"Eeh? Speak up! I can't hear when you mumble into your lap!"

"Do. I. Have. A. Birthday?" He repeats, slowly, like he was speaking to a person he considered to be very simple.

"I, uh, I guess?" the red one replies, glancing at the shortest for help. Met only with shrug he continues on, face puckered in confusion. "I mean you kind of…have to have one. If you're alive. So, yeah, I think you must have a birthday."

Chapter 1 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/43026237/chapters/108112638) : questions and answers

Notes:

What's this? A multi-chaptered fic? I'm just as surprised as the rest of you!

This idea would NOT leave me alone, and the intro to the plot ended up being way longer than I anticipated, but I love Slice of Life so fucking much you guys I can't help myself. So, I'm finally back to what this AU was supposed to be about in the first place! Spoiling the shit out of Yellow and letting him have some loving moments with his lawyer-sharing clump family!

Also, I really really miss the summer, so I wrote this sort of as a love letter to those humid summer nights when time doesn't feel real. I'm sure that England doesn't have weather at all like upstate NY does but like, whatever, it's my fanfic about a gore-filled adult puppet show so I can do what I want!!!

Come say hi to me on my new tumblr!!! (as I'm not sure twitter is going to exist soon lol) @myshredda 😊

EDIT: We got fanart!!!! It's sooo so cute and beautiful everyone go give it notes!!!
https://www.tumblr.com/chicken-needle-soup/702780176497606656/no-matter-what-we-must-eat-to-live

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_1_endnotes) .)

Another day, warm light drifting lazily in the windows, dust dancing in the staggered beams. It was later, nearly dinner, the yellow one watching TV as the other two cooked, half asleep on a green armchair. The kitchen was filled with fried food smells, starchy and hot, oven chips spread across an old, lipped baking sheet like golden bits of rib. There's a quiet sound of conversation, hushed, like the wind through leaves, and the soft, bright notes of piano music float in through the open sitting room door.

"Did we buy more fish fingers?" The shortest one asks, glaring up at the tallest, arms crossed. One foot taps a quick, staccatoed annoyance, but the bob of his tail gives away the underlying contentment must feel.

"Dunno," the tallest one answers, locks of yarn swishing in the light breeze. The window has been pushed open and puffs of humid air leak in lazily between the churr of summer insects, crickets and grasshoppers humming in the heat of the evening.

"Well could you please *look?*" The little webbed foot taps faster, though his feathered tail matches its tempo.

"S'matter?" Red asks, expression neutral. "Can't you reach the freezer?"

"You know I can reach the freezer, you horrid creature." He sniffs, tail bob-bob-bobbing along, swishing dust around in the hazy, sunlit air. "I was simply wondering if you felt like actually helping me, I don't know, cook? For once?"

"I help cook," the red one says, voice even, eyes glinting with amusement. "More importantly, I help eat. Where would you both be without me? Drowning in leftovers I'd think."

"Ehh? *Augh!*" Duck groans, unamused. "You are *so* useless. You and your weight gain!"

"Hey now," Red huffs a laugh, voice muffled, his upper body shoved near-entirely into the icy confines of the freezer. Amused, despite the duck's apparently harsh words, as if fond of their little spats. "Don't diss the weight gain. It makes me fun to hug, so says the other one. 'Sides." His head pops out of the deepfreeze, ice particles clinging to his yarn, a smug, meandering smile spread across his face. "It's mostly your fault anyway."

"My fault?"

"Yeah." A few glassy pieces of frost are flicked into the sink, pinched between a red thumb and the vague area where a pointer finger should be. "You cook too much."

"Too much? *Too much?*" The angry tamp of webbed feet grows louder, more rapid. All the while a stumpy, green tail swishes along, to and fro, a feathered metronome of pleased complacency. "Why, it weren't for me, neither of you idiots

would eat! You'd starve to death in the foyer, fork in hand, moronic looks of uselessness left on your stupid skulls for all eternity!"

"Anyway," Red continued, speaking like he'd never been interrupted. "You cook too much. Maybe you should try making worse food. If you didn't want me to be so…fluffy."

"I never said I didn't want you to be fluffy," an exasperated look has plastered itself to the duck's face, but a fondness lurks in his eyes. "And I'll never be able to make worse food! I can't suppress my raw, natural talent, even if I wanted to."

"I suppose you can't," the tallest one sighs, voice rumbling deep in his chest, a teasing look half-suppressed behind lidded eyes.

They're standing close together now, shoulder to hip, working in tandem despite their constant back and forth. The avian drags filmy, white lard across another pan, greasing it, metal tinged pink from whatever blood was left over from the separating process. Wordlessly, the taller of the two begins to place the crusty shards of fish on the tray, nudging them apart, leaving enough room so they wouldn't burn together if the chum leaked, gelatinous, escaping from the cracks in the breading.

A comfortable silence settles over the kitchen, like a favorite blanket, tatty with age. Made up of frayed edges and worn with use, heavily enveloping the two in its familiar weight. It's nice to stand there, a balmy breeze languidly twisting red yarn round and round, cheerfully tangling the string with itself. The knots would have to be picked out later, green, feathered fingers not-so-gently tugging at them, a shrill voice chastising any whines or garbled complaints.

But for now, there was only the drowsy hum of summer, birdsong and insect buzzing, the melodic tinkling of the windchimes Yellow had begged to put up. Uncovered deep in the bowels of the hall closet and hung haphazardly from a low tree branch, tinny tubes of silver suspended around a thick, wooden puck. Red had taken a liking to the music-box tones it twinkled out, something almost calming about the way it swayed and shivered in the slight breeze. Besides, it made the little one happy, so it had to be good for something. Small comforts and all that.

Oven loaded and timer set the duo meander to the table, still squabbling about anything they can think to fight about. The heat, the pollen, how the bigger one never remembers to put more lemonade in the fridge after he's drunk the last cold bottle, the list goes on. The conversation trailing on endlessly as the oven slowly crisps up their junk food, too lazy on this humid evening to put forth effort into a healthier meal. Soft sounds from the sitting room drift in at times, the dulcet tones of an elderly narrator helpfully explaining about the intricacies of life. How different cultures experience the same things differently, like holidays, and birthdays, and funerals.

There's something so peaceful here, in this moment, sitting at the table, lemonade fizzing, effervescent in twin crystalline glasses. Red wishes he could pause time, bubble up the smell of the air, the giggly joy that thrums through his chest every time Duck shrieks at him. And then, the timer dings, breaking the lull that had fallen over them both. Beckoning their attention to the glowing oven, the promise of crispy chips and briny fish fingers drifting in wafts of salt-tinged air. Their plumply golden forms displayed, full and fatty, as the oven is propped open by Duck.

"Go get him," He says, slipping on the polka dot oven mitts, oversized on his smaller digits. "These are done, and I'd rather not let them get cold while he whines about being woken up."

"Alright," Red sighs, bracing his hands on his knees and standing with a muffled groan. Old man noises, Yellow called them, the rude bugger. "If I'm not back in five just assume I've been lost to post-nap rage."

"Fine," the shortest one sniffs, prodding at a chunky slab of crusty fish with a fork, inspecting its done-ness. "But I shan't come to your rescue."

"Traitor," Red mumbles, slipping into the darkened mouth of the sitting room, illuminated only by the glow of the TV. Curtains drawn, assumedly by Yellow, flutter in the slight breeze, flapping up enough to usher in split-seconds of golden sunlight. The boy is curled into the well-loved upholstery of Red's chair, half-leaning against the arm, a geometric green and blue pillow stuffed under his head. He's awake, but barely, eyes glinting wetly in the phosphorescent light.

"H'llo," he yawns, mouth wide, eyes screwed shut. Legs curving, sitting almost fetally, knees drawn near his chest. "Is it done?"

"The food? Yeah."

The TV flickers through images of various mourning rituals, snippets of anguish flashing by. Old women cloaked in black, writhing and wailing on a rocky beach, then, a man dressed in all white, weeping bitterly, camera pressing in claustrophobically on his face.

"Ugh," Red glowers at the screen, reaching to tug the clicker from Yellow's limp grasp. He jabs the mute button with a self-satisfied motion, screen now splashed with the silent image of a lone figure, jerkily digging into a freshly covered grave. "Why do you always watch this morbid tripe?"

"S'interesting," Yellow yawns again, peering up at his tallest housemate with bleary eyes. "Carry me?"

"Carry you? Why? Are your legs broken?" Red asks, pretending to fuss at him. He can't help but gaze down tenderly at the curled form of the youngest one like a feeble-minded old fool. He was always reduced to a sappy lump whenever

Yellow got like this, sleepy and pliant, all small smiles and huge, liquid-black eyes. Forever staring up at him like he was the most wonderful sight in the world.

"Yeh."

"Yeah? How'd that happen?"

"Dunno. Just happens sometimes."

"Well, *alright.*" Red heaves, faking a weary exasperation. "I guess I'll have to carry you then, with your legs being broken and all that."

"Okay!" the yellow one grins, happily jiggling his allegedly broken legs in a very non-broken way, arms raised up, wide and welcoming.

Red can't help but grin back as he bends at the waist, carefully tugging the child up into his grasp, one arm securely wrapped under his bum. Yellow clings to his neck, burying his face in the wind-tousled yarn for a moment, small body radiating a sleepy warmth from where it presses into Red's. The big one flicks the remote again, fully killing the TV and plunging the sitting room into relative darkness, chuckling at the way Yellow squeaks at the sudden change in light.

"You okay?" He affectionately nudges the smaller head with his own, butting at the fuzzy patch of blue locks and buzzed stubble. Slowly, he makes his way to the door, the rectangular shape opening up into the glowing light of the kitchen, like someone had taken a knife and cut through the dark. "How's the legs?"

"Huh? Oh. They're good." He flexes them, feet drumming against the taller one's hip. "I think they're healing, at a, uh, at a good rate."

"I should say so." They stroll fully into the kitchen now, greeted by the hot, greasy smell of battered fish and fried potato.

Duck turns to look as they enter, taking in the way Yellow is cradled in Red's gentle grasp and rolling his eyes, exasperated. Muttering a *'softhearted fool'* under his breath as he portions out the plates, a bottle of oily, red-brown sauce already placed on the table. Turbid shards of yellowed fat drift semi-suspended in the liquid, bottle already shaken by Duck to emulsify the separated layers of oil and red fluid. It was Yellow's absolute favorite dressing, Red noted, as he deposited the little one into his chair. Chest flickering with warmth at the sight of him shimmying happily in his seat, almost dancing in excitement over the meal. Duck must have noticed too, from the way his beak was thrust high in the air, an expression of haughty pride clinging to his cheeks. And he called Red the soft one, the bloody hypocrite.

A placid ease ushers into the room, made up of dull clatters as Duck doles out the plates, the sound of Red rummaging through the cupboard and producing a third glass. The carbonated fizz of bubbles reaching a crescendo as he pours a lemonade for Yellow, refilling his and Duck's cups as well. The smooth swish of air as Yellow swings both legs, elbow on the table, face resting in one hand. Muted *thank-yous*, the curve of a smile, echoed by an equally amicable *you're welcome.* The clinking of silverware, a bottle being popped open and its meaty contents being slopped over chips, bits of bone and stringy sinew flecked on the table.

"Thanks," Yellow repeats around a mouthful of crispy skin, rounded cheeks spotted red with sauce. "It's really good again."

"My cooking is always good," Duck tsks, reaching out with a napkin to swipe at the youngest's face, half-smiling at the compliment. "Stop moving around, that food on your face is disgusting and I refuse to look at it any longer!"

"Hey, what about me? I helped cook as well."

"You just complained! And you faffed about the whole time!"

"Wow, I resent that remark." Red laughs, his chuckles mixing with Yellow's sleepy giggles. "I didn't faff, I barely dawdled."

"S'really good," Yellow breaks in, glancing up at Red with unguarded eyes. "Thanks as well."

Red just nods at him, smugly, pointedly ignoring Duck's loudly exhaled *hmph!*

They resume the unhurried eating, sun sinking lower and lower in the sky, igniting the horizon streaks of pinks and reddish-orange. Forks clink, teeth click, soft tissue is rendered and halved between sharp canines, sharp beaks, the benign sounds of life filling the room.

It wouldn't have been like this, before, when they lived at the mercy of teachers and teachable moments. Always tense, words checked and rechecked in their minds before spoken aloud, ready for anything they said to be taken as a declaration of ignorance. Living life on the edge of a trembling knife, ready to reach and slash out lurid punishments at any misspoken moment.

There was no room for kindness, for pleases and thank yous, for sharing some good food at the end of a deliciously lazy day. No place for a bit of banter with the people you liked, maybe even loved. No family meals filled with easy laughter and quibbles and jokes, never able to thrive in an environment that felt as if you were waiting for an atomic bomb to drop. Each teacher's personality as unpredictable as the last, doling out chastisements in the form of broken bones and mangled bodies. But there had been no punishments today, and there hadn't been, not for a long time.

“Do I have a birthday?” Yellow suddenly asks the room at large, focus laser-locked on his last fish finger, carefully separating the white flakes of flesh to tease out flimsy bones, crunching happily on the osseous bits of spine he could find.

“What?”

“Eeh? Speak up! I can’t hear when you mumble into your lap!”

“Do. I. Have. A. Birthday?” He repeats, slowly, like he was speaking to a person he considered to be very simple.

“I, uh, I guess?” the red one replies, glancing at the shortest for help. Met only with shrug he continues on, face puckered in confusion. “I mean you kind of…have to have one. If you’re alive. So, yeah, I think you must have a birthday.”

“When is it?” He finally looks up, smacking his lips around his fork. His face is neutral, if not a little curious, clearly interested in what the other two have to say.

“What do you mean *‘when is it’*?” Duck scowls at him, annoyed by the seemingly nonsensical questions. “It’s *your* birthday, you’re the only one that would know when it is!”

“Oh…okay.” His fork clinks on the plate again, idly playing with the dwindling number of chips.

“You don’t know when it is,” Red says, the weight of the words beginning to sink in. “Do you?”

“Uhhhhmmm…I don’t think so. Yeah. No, I don’t know.”

“Well…could you, uh, find out somehow?”

“Maybe,” the youngest huffs a sigh, savoring the last salty bite of chip, jaw working thoughtfully. “But- but I don’t think- I’m, uh, my… My dad doesn’t know either. Said it wasn’t worth re-remember…remembering.”

A tense energy fills the kitchen, conversation no longer lazily meandering about, now it feels poised, like a snake gearing up to strike. Duck glares into the middle-distance, annoyance at the yellow one blooming into a familiar anger at the mention of his father. Red exhales slowly, the effort it takes to unclench his jaw uses every ounce of mental strength that he’s got. It wouldn’t do for the kid to think they were mad at him, and it’s not really in the boy’s wheelhouse to be able to suss out complex emotions.

“Hm. I don’t agree with him on that,” the tallest one states, elbow jerking out quickly to catch the duck’s side, startling him out of his stewing. “Duck?”

“***OW!*** *What was that-”*

“You don’t agree either, *RIGHT?”*

“About WHAT?”

“That it’s not worth remembering what day his birthday is.” Red grinds out, teeth clenched tightly together. So much for not letting his anger show.

Yellow is glancing between them, brow furrowed, looking almost as though he’s judging them for the sudden outburst. His eyes lingering on Duck’s outraged face, Red’s sullen smothering of emotions, gaze bordering on perceptive.

“No I don’t think its stupid! I think it’s a very normal thing to keep track of someone's birthday! Never elbow me like that again, you big, red lump, I think you bruised me!”

“I did not,” Red groans, pinching the space between his eyes, a headache beginning to form.

“You did! I’ll be purple for weeks!”

“Guys-”

“You can’t even see it under the feathers!”

“You guys…”

“Well, I can feel it under the feathers!”

“Guys!” Yellow breaks in, voice raised. It immediately cuts through the spat, as does the pensive look on his face, and the way he’s twisted his fingers together. Squeezing at them until they wrinkle and warp in his nervous grip, his hold painfully tight. When he speaks again it’s hushed, sound getting trapped in the hollow of his throat. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What?”

“What did he say?”

There’s a muffled ruffling as the duck absently rubs his side, hand buried under the tweed fabric of his jacket, and for an all-consuming moment the only thing Red can feel is guilt. Ashamed of how quickly he had reverted back into his more morose disposition at the simple mention of Roy, ashamed that he hadn’t been able to control his tone, that he’d almost been goaded into a fight. A real fight, nothing at all like the banter he’d grown to savor, playing their conversations over and over in his mind at night as he drifted to sleep, picking out his favorite comebacks and choosing which of Duck’s expressions he’d found the most amusing.

No, this had been very close to turning into something he’d thought was behind them now, something ugly and hurtful. It was bad enough that they’d got like this in front of Yellow, but the boy had to be the one that snapped them both out of it. He felt very embarrassed about the whole thing if he was being completely honest.

“It doesn’t matter. About- about the day of it. I was just wondering. That’s all.” Yellow speaks up again, nerves unable to withstand the stilted silence that had overtaken the kitchen. His forehead is wrinkled, shoulders hunched, as if shrinking down on himself will save the conversion from its potential turn into another round of arguing. “Please don’t fight.” He begs, voice crackling like an old radio. “I’m sorry that I- If I asked something wrong.”

Well doesn’t that make Red feel like absolute shit? He might as well have gone out of his way to punt a baby seal around the room, just to really flesh out his assholery, given that he had already managed to make the most innocuous of the three think he was to blame for their needless quarreling. He shares a guilty look with Duck, watching as the avian fiddles with his jacket, a sheepishly embarrassed expression blooming across his face. Right, high time to fix this mess.

“You didn’t ask anything wrong,” Red interjects, playing with his empty glass, unsure of what to do with his hands as he tries to mold his abashed awkwardness into something resembling assuring. “We were being stupid all on our own, nothing to do with you.”

“Yeah, it isn’t your fault this one is a great big oaf,” Duck trills out, voice exaggeratedly teasing, feebly attempting his own weird version of damage control. “He comes by that naturally.”

“*Gee*, *thanks*.” Red intones flatly.

“You’re very welcome.”

“So…you guys aren’t mad?”

“We’re not mad.” Duck assures him, reaching to pry yellow fingers apart, thumb worrying at the raised marks left behind.

“Not at me? Or…or at each-other?”

“Neither one,” Red reaches and grasps Duck’s free hand, the little shock of joy he feels each time their hands connect a familiar jolt deep in his gut. “See? No fighting here. We’re all made up.”

They both grin awkwardly, smiles plastered widely across their faces as the yellow one takes in the scene. He squints, cocking his head to one side, before slowly nodding, expression tentatively hopeful.

“Okay…” He squeezes Duck’s hand, still held in both his small fists. “That’s good.”

“Yep, everything’s good,” Duck tugs his hand from Yellow’s, reaching up to ruffle his hair, jiggling his head around in his grasp. “That’s enough theatrics for tonight, finish your lemonade.”

“It’s warm now, prob-probably.” Yellow gripes, jerking his head from the duck’s clutching fingers. “An’ the fizz is gonna be all gone.”

“Well, if you don’t want it, I’ll drink it,” Red cuts in, pretending to reach for the nearly-empty glass, grimacing at the sticky fingerprints spattered across the smooth exterior. “It is what I’m best at, after all.”

“No! *No!* It’s mine!” The youngest panics, grabbing his drink with both hands and gulping it down like it was water in a desert. He smacks his lips, burps, and sets the cup back down on the table with a loud clunk, mouth curved in a satisfied line.

“Eugh! Manners!” Duck shrieks, and Red is unable to tell if he’s still hamming up his mood or if he’s truly horrified at the hollow suckling noise Yellow had made while greedily slurping down his drink. “No doing…whatever that was! Ever again!”

“Drinking?”

“*No*, I mean guzzling down liquids like some possessed hoover. I should think you have more decorum than that!”

“D-decor… rum? I don’t- I don’t know what that is.” The boy casts a pleading look at the red one, fully utilizing his impressive puppy dog eyes, begging to be saved from one of Duck’s drawn-out lessons on respectful etiquette. He fell prey to them the most due to his clumsy nature and jumbled speech patterns, not that Red fared much better when the duck got into one of his moods.

Which, judging by the snooty look in Duck’s eyes, Red figured they were about t-minus three minutes away from a lecture on how Yellow’s behavior would have never been acceptable in the military. Wouldn’t that be an utterly ghastly end to their nice evening? Ah well, he could at least try to pull focus from the yellow one.

“And where would he have learned this decorum? From you?”

“Ehh? Obviously from me! Can’t count on him learning anything from you other than how to sit around and be content with a dull day.”

“Only dull people think things are dull,” Red interjects happily, gathering the dishware and taking them to the sink. His cheeky wink at Yellow succeeds in putting a smile back on his face, all chubby cheeks and crinkled eyes, one hand coming up to hold tightly to the front of his overalls.

With that, the calm atmosphere floods back into the room, like water flushing through a dry riverbed. The peaceful sounds of the summer unfold again into their conversation: crickets, windchimes, the far-off cry of a fox, shrieking in glee as it stalks some unlucky animal in the shockingly orange glow of the setting sun. It feels almost as though they’d passed

some kind of test, like the stagnant energy of the room had deemed their treatment of the youngest to be acceptable, allowing the external sounds and smells to rush back into their senses. Odd.

"You're dull!" Duck squawks, insulted. "I don't have to sit here and listen to this- this *degradation* of my character! Come on," He stands from his chair, locking his grasp around the yellow one's shoulder and pulling him along. "You're in desperate need of a good scrubbing, honestly, how you manage to get so filthy when you eat is *beyond me*."

"Ah! Ow! My shoulder!"

"Hush *up*, I'm barely touching you! Now you are going to have clean hands and a clean face for bed, I mean it!"

Their argument fades as they make their way to the bathroom, leaving Red to fill the sink alone, ruminating over the events of the evening as he swishes water and washing-up liquid around in the basin. Silently pondering as he snaps on his gloves, washes the pans, placing them on a tea towel to dry for tonight. Still thinking as he pulls the plug from the bottom, watching as the oily water filters down the drain, a mini-vortex of bubbles and scummy silt. Wiping down the table with a damp rag, placing the bottle of sauce back in the fridge, brows furrowed, gloves removed, ambling down the hallway to the bathroom.

The door is open, and he's greeted by the sight of Duck brushing his feathers with a flat-backed boar bristle brush, seemingly alone.

"Where's- where is he?"

"Picking out his story."

"Ah," Red fishes his wide toothed comb from the cup on the sink, glaring at it for a moment, reflecting on the pain he's sure he's about to go through. "Sorry about the, uh, whole elbowing thing."

"You should be!" Duck sniffs, but he's clicking his beak the way he always does when he's got something on his mind. "Thank you though. For the apology."

"It's nothing." Red says through gritted teeth, yanking the comb through tangled knots of yarn.

"Stop that- give it here! Do you want to rip all your strings out?"

"No," the tallest one mumbles sullenly, coming to rest on the side of the bathtub, so used to their little ritual at this point he already knows the gist of what's to happen. It's a bit embarrassing, being a grown…man, and still unable to take care of his yarn without help.

Though truthfully, he doesn't mind it as much as he used to, it's nice to feel Duck's fingers carding through the fibers, tugging at knots, hands brushing across his face. Their difference in height is less-drastic with the staggered positions they're in, Duck standing, Red sitting, their gazes almost eye-to-eye. Sometimes, Red wonders what would happen if he reached out and grasped the hand in his yarn, drawing the avian nearer to him, bodies pressed together, close enough that he would simply have to angle his face up and-

"*OW!*"

"Oh, shush. You're more whiny than the other one, I swear."

"It's hard not to be whiny when I'm *BLEEDING*."

"You are *not* bleeding, stop being so dramatic. I'm almost done."

"Almost done maiming me…" he mumbles, hand coming up to massage his sore scalp.

Duck is silent again, beak clicking out a fast tempo, like he were trying to communicate through morse code. Hands buried deep in the sanguine fibers, chasing the last, stubborn knot.

Red takes pity on him, knowing the bird has something to say, but is unwilling to breach the silence and say it. It's strange, he's so loud all the time and yet he has the tendency to withhold his deeper thoughts when they're bothering him. Fortunately, Red's used to his waffling by now.

"What is it?"

"What?"

"You want to say something, I know you do. Just say it."

"Don't act like you know what I'm thinking!"

"Mate," Red groans, batting Duck's hands away from his strings. They were all untangled now, the avian was just stalling. "I can tell you're cooking something up in there. What is it?"

"He- he doesn't even know when his bloody birthday is!"

Ah, *that*.

"And he asked us! Like we would have any idea." The shortest one sets his jaw, brows drawn down low over his eyes, face an angry mirror of Red's own feelings on the situation. "I can't believe that- that *man* would- Oh, what am I saying? Of course I can believe it. Wretched, he's absolutely wretched."

"I know," Red growls, deep in his throat, as if he were gathering venom to spit. "I hate it. I hate him. And his meddling. And I hate that he's caused so much…so many awful things." Red stands then, throwing his arms up in exasperated annoyance. "The kid doesn't even have a birthday!"

“Well…” Duck says, words clattering through his rapidly clicking beak. “He potentially could have one.”

“What are you saying? Stop clacking, I can’t hear you do that.”

“I *SAID*, he could have one.” Duck declares, hands on his hips, tail slowly trembling to life. “We could give him one.”

“Give him- give him what? A birthday?”

“Well, yes.” He stares up at Red, eyes bright. “If he doesn’t have one, we can give him one! We’ll have a cake and everything.”

“A cake…” Red says, slowly, turning the idea over in his mind like an old farthing. “We could make a cake.”

“Exactly!” The shortest one cries, tail whipping into a frenzied wag. “We have candles in the junk-drawer, I saw them the other day.”

“And we could- we could get him presents.”

“And sing the song!” Duck is bouncing on his toes now, small body unable to contain his excitement, “I’ve been wanting to sharpen my entertaining skills,” He’s grinning up at Red, his smile as bright as a thousand-watt bulb. “They’re a very important talent to have you know, especially for a time like this!”

“Yeah?”

“Yes!” He’s tapping his feet in time with the tempo of his tail, flapping his hands around in excited little fits and jerks. “This is going to be great!”

Red just grins back down at him, sluggish and soppy, heart worn so fully on his sleeve it may as well be a wristwatch. If he had a tail it’d be wagging as well, or maybe he did have one, he could almost feel the solid weight of it thumping against his legs.

“I think you may be right.”

“Of course I’m right! I’m always right, you know that.” He’s tugging Red’s arm now, motioning him downward, and for one second Red thinks he's going to do…something. Something intimate, something that makes his stomach jerk up into his other organs and dislocate his heart, thumping crazily in the space previously occupied by his right lung.

“Wh-what, what is it?”

“Just come here!”

“Uh, um, o-okay.” He crouches down, low enough that they’re close to eye level, face alight, feeling as though every one of his brain cells has leaked out his ears. Duck reaches up, hand cradling the right side of his face, thumb gently brushing his cheek, and the only thought that can work its way out of his brain is *I don’t even have lips* before the avian is leaning forward and-

“OUCH!”

“There, I’ve got the last of them,” Duck grins at him, pleased. “Pesky knot!”

“...Thanks.” Red grumbles, standing to his full height and bringing his hand up to sooth his sore temple. “For that.”

“You’re welcome! Now,” the shortest one grabs hand, pulling him through the open door out into the hallway. “We should get in there before he decides we’re never coming back and starts panicking and tearing the room apart again.”

“He only did that once,” the tallest one sighs, letting himself be dragged along, perhaps taking in the sight of Duck’s wagging tail, just a bit fondly. *Stupid bird.* “And it was because you told him we were leaving and never coming back.”

“I did no such thing!”

“Yes, you did. After he ate your secret stash of Jammie Dodgers.”

“Oh yes, I do remember that now. Anyway, I was only joking!”

“He ripped the door off its hinges, Mate. I don’t think he got the joke.”

“We put it back!”

Red shoots him a pointed look as he opens the bedroom door, the crickety warble of bent hinges dropping off into a long, low creek. Duck glares back, releasing his hand and flouncing his way into the room. *Drama queen.*

Their sudden appearance is greeted with a happy shriek from Yellow, barreling over to them and excitedly extending the book he’d picked. Red smiles warmly at the boy as he bounces around, picture book gripped in his hands, arms held straight up in the air. Glancing down at it as it’s deposited into his awaiting hand, a simple illustration of a girl and a tiger splashed across the cover, familiar blue text informing him it was about ‘ *The Tiger Who Came to Tea,’* one of the youngest’s absolute favorites.

Duck pats the kid on the head and bustles off to finish his own nightly routine, leaving Red to his usual task getting Yellow in bed, tucking him snugly under the covers after he’s clambered into his cozy nest. He can’t help but chuckle as he settles his larger frame down on the edge of the bed, springs creaking, Yellow’s excited face peering up at him, awaiting his story. Wiggling his feet happily under the covers as Red begins to read the book aloud in his monotonous voice as Duck futzes about with his own bed. Drawing the blankets back and fluffing his pillow, putting up a neutral front of disinterest, but Red knows he’s listening.

"Excuse me, but I'm very hungry," He says, voice a faux-growl. Yellow snuggles deeper under his duvet, eyes drooping as he mouths along with the words. *"Do you think I could have tea with you?"*

Duck cracks a window, and the quiet sounds of night begin to drift in with the cool breeze, curtains fluttering along to the beat of Red's heart. There, in that moment, between the hoot of owls and mindless chittering katydids, he makes his mind up. Gazing into Yellow's soft face, watching as his eyes slip further and further closed. Small mouth dropping open, breath whistling out, thickened with sleep. An urge of protective ferocity engulfs his heart, his throat, his very soul.

They were going to throw the best fucking birthday party this world has ever seen.

Notes:

Title from Little Weirds by Jenny Slate. The full(ish) quote is: "I'm stuck here in a cycle and I am getting older but I am not growing up and my heart is getting soft dark spots on it like a fruit that has gone bad..." which strikes me as very comparable to a character like Yellow.

I think Yellow is a person (puppet?) that clearly feels things deeply, I think he's very emotionally intelligent and I relate to him a lot honestly. He was so sweet in the friendship episode with his brain friends, his main form of escapism is to dissociate and imagine a group of people that are kind and loving and gentle with each other like it makes me cry. I think he's just a little guy with a big heart and by GOD i'm gonna give him some happiness and a supportive family unit, even if it's only in my specific AU

PS: I just wanted to say thanks again for all the wonderful comments you've left on my other works! I still can't believe the outpouring of support I've gotten on these fics, and it's honestly been an amazing experience for me as a person who's always felt my writing was a little so-so. I love hearing from you all!!!!!!

See you all soon in chapter 2 😊

Chapter 2 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/43026237/chapters/108483729): planning and presents

Summary:

Planning the best fucking birthday party this world has ever seen was hard, it turns out. Very hard. Exceptionally hard, especially when the person that said birthday party was being planned for was clingier than an octopus and refused to be left out of any conversations within earshot.

Notes:

When I originally set out to make this fic I was planning on it being only one chapter, which then blossomed into two, and has now become three 🤷 Chapter two is basically laying the groundwork for the entire party/cake/birthday situation, and I debated skipping past it because it ended up being very wordy, but like this is a slice of life fic so I figure I should put in some life for the fic to be sliced out of lol.

Again, I started this fic with the intent of fixing Yellow's lack of parental support, and for the past two chapters I've had to focus on the old, gay men secretly planning a party. Unfortunately, my boy has been kind of shuffled off to the side for the sake of plot. Sorry! He'll get more focus in the next chapter, I swear!

Also, I mention Red's 'fingers' a few times in this fic and I just wanted to say that I assume he has some kind of mitten situation happening with his hands. Like, he's able to have 'fingers' in the way you still have fingers when you're wearing mittens, it just looks kind of weird when he uses them.

TBH I'm not actually sure if I like this chapter or not, so catch me on tumblr @myshredda and let me know what you think! Sometimes I post WIPs of chapters and ask for feedback so you could potentially let me know if my work is up to your standards or not lmao. I'm on twitter at the same @ as well but idk if that site is going to be around much longer so I've been using tumblr a lot more lately.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_2_endnotes).)

Planning the best fucking birthday party this world has ever seen was hard, it turns out. Very hard. Exceptionally hard, especially when the person that said birthday party was being planned for was clingier than an octopus and refused to be

left out of any conversations within earshot.

The red one found this all out the hard way the following day, sweating and swearing through the horribly muggy afternoon, stuffing the felt he was cutting into cheerful triangles underneath his thick leg a split second before the yellow one tore into the room. Bouncing on his toes, words spilling from his mouth at breakneck speed, nattering on about the cool stick he'd found outside and the bottle cap that had come along with it. Eyes sparkling with an uncontainable excitement, showing all the clear signs of having an impulsive urge to do *something*. Something the tallest was sure he'd find out sooner rather than later, if the way the boy had begun to hop breathlessly in place before his feet was any form of indication, which is usually was.

The smaller one shook his head rapidly, as if the motion would kick start his brain. Clearing his thoughts enough to settle on a decision, one to be executed with a single-minded concentration. He stamped his left foot once, twice, there was the wind up, and then, he was clambering up into Red's now-empty lap. The soft weight of his body pressing Red's thighs down harder on the concealed mess of half-finished bunting and scissors, still speaking animatedly of the walk he and Duck had gone on. It had turned out to be an incredibly short walk, Red thought, as he tried to nudge the sheers under his leg into a more comfortable position, his efforts in vain.

Duck plodded in, much slower than Yellow, trying and failing to keep the jovial smirk from his face. The glint of schadenfreude in his eyes, however, couldn't have been broadcast clearer. The wanker.

Red flipped him a casual bird out of Yellow's line of sight, the boy cheerfully none the wiser as his ramblings moved onto the shape of the clouds, like big fluffy mounds of mashed potatoes, and then he was thinking aloud that couldn't they have a bit of mash for lunch? Just a little bit? Potatoes counted as a vegetable, and vegetables were healthy, so could they please? Pretty please? They had some Smash packets in the cupboard actually, not that he had been looking for them or anything, so…please?

"Fine," Red sighs, though his heart flipped cartwheels of relief. Another precious few minutes of time apart from the ball of endless, youthful energy they called family. Enough time, at least, for him to pull the scissors from the indent they had surely left in his thigh by now. "You and he can make instant Smash for lunch if you want."

He winces as Yellow noisily expressed his glee, squealing out thank-yous as he tucked himself under a sturdy arm and began squeezing the bigger body with all his might. Honestly, the smallest morsels of kindness could elicit a reaction of complete, undiluted adoration from the boy. Like he'd been so used to surviving off scraps of neutrality the mere implications of niceness could send him into a fit of overzealous appreciation.

A warmth began curling in Red's chest, overtaking the threads of annoyance that had curdled there. It was very hard to foster any kind of long-term irritation with the child, especially considering how his actions came from a place of pure innocence. It was much like having a puppy that shredded your slippers, incredibly exasperating in the now, but who could stay mad at that cute little face? Certainly not Red.

"Thanks!" Yellow squeaks, voice muffled in the woolly plush of Red's chest. "It's- they're gonna be so tasty, I know it!"

"Of course it will be," Duck says, ignoring the touching scene in favor of hanging his overcoat on its hook, flicking at specks of earth that seemed to cling to its inky frame. He had a smug air about him, grinning a bit as he glanced over at the two of them. "I'm making it aren't I?"

"Oh wow. You've got enough culinary expertise to rehydrate potato flakes, we're all very impressed." Red rolls his eyes, still miffed at the lack of warning. Leveling an unimpressed look at the distastefully V shaped two-finger salute the duck casually flashed in return. Rude bugger. Shifting again he felt the cold press of metal sink further into his leg, not piercing his flesh but settling uncomfortably into it. Right then, high time to get this show on the road.

"Alright," he says, voice warm. Gathering the youngest one a gentle squeeze that graduated into a full bear hug, accompanied by a long, satisfied hum that grumbled out from the depths of his chest. After a long moment he released the boy from his grasp, carefully nudging him off his lap and to the floor. "Pop off now, yeah? Go help that one cook. Needs all the help he can get, I think."

"Okay," Yellow mumbles, cheeks rosy, almost drunk on the affection. He turns, trots over to Duck, and gives a jaunty little wave at the tallest one as he exits. As though he'd planned on being gone for hours rather than just stepping into the next room.

Red waved back, heart fizzing like an antacid tablet plunged deep into a glass of water. Pointedly not watching the way Duck snickered at their carrying on, which Red thought was very brave of him. As to his knowledge, the avian was also absolutely coiled around the yellow one's finger. Willing to do anything the youngest asked if he did so politely, in spite of his constant complaining while doing so. After all, he was the one holding a knobby bit of stick and a chipped, gold Ribena cap, tripping and trailing along after the boy as he blundered around the kitchen.

If Red were to ask him to hold his still-beating heart for safekeeping he was sure the bird would have shrieked refusals and warbled declarations of disgust, and yet, little trinkets of Yellow's were held with utmost respect and a clear

understanding of their importance. He did feel a bit peeved at that, after all, sticks were basically just tree dandruff. He'd like to think his hypothetically de-homed heart was at least similarly significant to Duck.

Though, truthfully, despite his frustrations, he was glad Duck's attitude towards the child had softened as of late. He'd rather the avian be subtlety doting rather than distant and rude. And the lack of fights between the shortest two had been incredibly refreshing, though they had a higher tendency of banding together into an unmovable alliance when they wanted to weasel something out of Red. Like the last two pieces of bacon, or picking which movie they'd watch, or voting for who had to clean the scum ring out of the bathtub.

He craned his neck to peer through the open door of the kitchen, taking the sight of Duck instructing an enraptured Yellow on how to fill the saucepan with the correct amount of water, ensuring the fluffiest mounds of mashed root vegetable this side of the canal. It was honestly very sweet to watch and watching sweet scenes and thinking sappily about his two housemates was something he was more prone to doing as of late, yet, there was still a niggling pain in his thigh that needed addressing.

Surely enough, the shears left a comically detailed indentation in his thigh, and Duck and Yellow laughed uproariously at it as he ambled into the kitchen. Bloody rude, that's what it was. He slaved away in the blistering heat over those triangles, crafting a very dashing birthday bunting in green, citrusy hues, and this was the thanks he got? Mockery? Snide remarks about his indented bum? He was going to sell his roommates on Gumtree someday, he swears it. He could have the house to himself, just sit around all day and start betting on footy matches while drinking a Stella. It would be a much more enjoyable experience than the one he currently found himself in.

Though, if he auctioned off his stupid family members to the highest bidder, he wouldn't be able to sit at the table as he was now, placidly running his spoon through a bowl filled with mashed potato and nothing else. Badgering Duck into passing the salt, voice honeyed as he expressed faux concern about the other's lack of ability to season the food correctly. Sharing a little giggle with Yellow as the shortest one squawked out insults and threats of immediate potato eating privilege removal if the insult wasn't taken back *this instant.*

No, his life would be dull if he lived alone, he thought, clicking his teeth loudly against a spoonful of mashed potato, much too dull.

—

Eventually, after they finished their food and the dishes were done, Duck managed to distract Yellow by playing quiz shows on the kitchen telly, and Red was able to sneak back into the sitting room and finish the bunting. It was lovely, if he said so himself, which he did. All alternating greens and yellows in soft pastel tones that reminded Red of key lime and lemon pies. He'd made a few, enough to hang them around the kitchen, later, whenever they managed to get gifts and bake the cake. It wasn't much, but he knew Duck had some cut-out stars squirreled away somewhere, silently clipped from yellow paper in the middle of the night as the youngest one slumbered, unaware of the scrupulous planning that was happening all around him. They'd paste the stars to the walls as well, make a whole production of it. Yellow deserved as close to the best as they could get, it was his first birthday after all.

For now, Red admired his work, softly trailing his hand across the citrus-toned felt. Absently listening to Yellow excitedly bellow out completely incorrect answers to whichever questions were being asked on the TV, enraptured with a show about becoming a millionaire or some such tosh. It all felt very domestic, here in the light of the mid-afternoon sun, curtains cheerfully flipping and fluttering in the breeze. He could hear the clinks and tinkles of Yellow's wind chime so clearly now, buffeted in the wind, harmonizing with the swish of the long grass. The branches of trees filled with house sparrows and chaffinches, little birds with their busy lives, chirrups and phillips filling the air as they called to one another. He felt so peaceful, so warm. Humid air puffing in and rendering his brain into a comfortable mush, his head tipping back to rest against his chair. His eyes slipped shut, but he was just resting them, just for a moment. Simply admiring the lovely sounds of summer, before getting up and hiding the bunting.

—

"Wake up!"

"Huh?" Red blinked awake, eyes crusty, mouth dry. There was a crick in his neck from the awkward position he'd been in, head thrown back, yarn sucking in and out of his open mouth with the rise and fall of his chest. "Wha-?"

"You fell asleep, you useless lump," Duck hissed, voice low and brows lower. His foot was tapping wildly, and his feathers were trembling with rage. Ah, that wasn't good. "With the bunting on full display!"

"Oh. Oh, shit." Red groaned, looking down into his lap only to find it empty. He sat up fully, cracking the vertebrae in his neck back into place with a sickeningly loud series of pops. "Where is it? Did he…"

“No, stupid, he didn’t see.” He sniffs, beak high in the air. “You’re lucky I came in here to check on your progress without him.”

“Ah… Well, that’s good.” The taller one feels considerably embarrassed, both for almost blowing the surprise of the birthday party (though he was sure he’d be able to convince Yellow the bunting was for something else if he really had found it) and also for managing to fall asleep in his chair. Drowsy from the heat and the warm food in his belly, nodding off like he was an old man after a big lunch. Mortifying. “Did you hide them then or…”

“Yes,” Duck sniffs again, clearly feeling self-superior over his ability to stay awake during the afternoon hours. “I’ve hidden them in the same place as my stars. A place he’ll never look for them!”

“And where would that be?”

“In my trunk!” The smallest one throws his arms up, exasperated by the apparently dense nature of the tallest member of their strange family. “Could you *be* any thicker?”

“I mean I could be,” Red yawns, stretching his arms up over his head. Flickers of panic flushing from his system as he realized the potential crisis had been averted. “If you keep making potato-based foods for every meal.”

“Ehh? What does that have to do with- *OH!”* He squawked, looking appalled. “Oh my god! Stop DOING that.”

“Doing what?” Red grins, lazily. Smile curving under the strands of yarn and rippling the hard lines of his face.

“Twisting everything I say and- and relating it back to your big, pudgy body!”

“Wouldn’t have a big, pudgy body if you would stop making oven chips and mash packets all the time.”

“Can I help it if it’s the only thing *that one* wants to eat?” Duck shakes his head, a mix of fondness and irritation filtering across his face. He’s half-smiling to himself, feathers finally beginning to lay down, lightly ruffled by the breeze. High time to be a bit of a bother, Red decides, just to return the favor for the earlier fiasco. The shortened walk that had resulted in him hiding the bunting in the first place, payback for his dented bum.

“Well, I thought you were supposed to be the head chef extraordinaire. *Surely* one little yellow thing shouldn’t be able to boss you around like that, eh? Or perhaps…” Red pauses, for dramatic effect. Contentedly taking in the way the smallest one’s face puckers and reddens, as if he’d swallowed a rather large, very sour lemon. “You’re getting *soft.” There*, Red hums a happy note as he stretches again, back popping deliciously. *A taste of his own medicine.*

“I… cannot… *BELIEVE* what I am hearing.” Duck fumes, and the sitting room filled with the angry sound of small, webbed feet slapping furiously against the floor. “I come in here and- and I find your big, useless lump of a body, *ASLEEP,* bunting spread all over you like some-sort of idiotic- moronic- *aughgh!”* He breaks off, fury apparently too great for his mouth to keep up with his brain. Instead, he takes to kicking at Red’s chair with said small feet, jostling the bigger one’s potato-filled form.

“Ah- ow! Stop that!”

“You stop it!”

“Stop what!”

“Stop being a cheeky bastard!”

“I’m not!” Red laughs, greatly enjoying this experience. There was nothing he loved more than infuriating Duck, just winding him up and watching him go. It felt like a natural outlet for the fearful fits of rage they used to fly into before, when the house felt less like a home and more like the deepest pit of hell. Now, in the balmy sitting room, the duck’s anger lacked bite. And it made him giggle like a fool to watch the smallest one rage, which, in turn, only made him rage harder at the perceived disrespect.

“You are!” Duck grouses, but a tiny smile starts to flicker across his face. He valiantly tries to keep his glare firmly affixed, but his beak starts to wobble and warp with amusement. “You’re awful!”

“I know,” Red reaches his own foot out to prod at the duck’s, teasingly. “I’m quite the cad.”

“Ugh,” The avian scoffs at him, foot extending for one final kick before stilling. A whisper of fondness floating about in his eyes, amusement now clear from the set of his jaw, the slow bob of his tail. “I can’t stand you. Either of you. You’re both wretched. I think I’ll move out and join one of those communes where they meditate for eighteen hours a day.”

“Why’s that?” Red asks, knowing the military-minded avian hates hippies and slackers of all kinds.

“They’ll all be busy doing whatever soft-brain dreck they do all day,” He grouses back, arms crossed, tail beginning its usual, slow back-and-forth. “And I’ll have no one to bother me.”

“And you’ll have no birthdays to plan either.” Red teases gently, eyes sappily soft. “You remember how much you love planning things, right? And bossing people around? You’d have no one to boss if you moved to a commune. And what about the other one? He’d be lost without your constant scolding. Probably become a degenerate that hangs around street corners and nicks magazines from the shops, hair all pink and spikey. He’ll probably start wearing one of those stupid dog collar things and everything.”

“Don’t remind me,” Duck sighs, ambling over to his rocking chair and collapsing down into it, seemingly exhausted. No longer in the mood for unrelated banter, he continues on without even humoring Red’s ribbing. Ignoring the playful dig

about his strict ideas on childrearing and his subsequent expectations of the yellow one's behavior. "We've only just finished the decorations, and I don't think that show of his is going to hold his attention for much longer. Not to mention we haven't even thought of what to get him for presents. Or where we'd even get them, for that matter."

"Ah," Red says, giving a start. "I forgot about those."

"The presents?"

"Yeah."

"Clearly," Duck snorts. Pushing off the floor with his toes to rock at a quick clip, chair squeaking and thumping in its familiarly rhythmic way. "I have to remember everything around here."

"Not really," Red grumbles, embarrassed to have forgotten about such an important part of the whole birthday-thing.

"Yes, really." The avian puffs out a long, world-weary sigh. As if burdened by the earth-shattering weight of being constantly right all the time. "Now, how should we go about this- this gift-acquiring…thing."

"We could- we could use the computer." Red says, squinting over at the plant pot in the corner.

"Who? Collin?" Duck asks, craning his neck to peer into the kitchen. He turns back, face placidly curious, apparently satisfied with the look he'd gotten of Yellow: the young boy staring slack-jawed at the TV screen as a commercial about end-of-life care for the annoyingly elderly plays.

"You know his name?"

"Well, yeah. Of course I do. Don't you?"

"Uhh…yes?"

"Don't lie, it's a vile habit."

"I'm not lying!" Red grins cheerily, thoroughly enjoying the rise he was able to get out of the bird simply by acting daft. "Anyway, we could just look up some stuff on the computer. And, uh, you know. Buy it."

"Hmmm…. I don't know. We'd have to use him in secret, and we can only do it once a year." He ponders for a minute, eyes squinted into the middle distance. "I'd hate for that one to miss computer day, you know how he gets when he feels left out."

"I do," the red one shudders, quick flashes of Yellow's horribly elongated face filtering through his mind. "Yeah, scratch that idea then."

"And Tesco is out of the question."

"It is? What about my Clubcard?"

"Well, we can't just leave him here alone!" Duck hisses, bringing one hand up to massage his temple. "And we can't shop with him in the trolley, rummaging through everything."

"Yeah…" Red hunches forward in his chair, elbow pressed against one knee, chin resting in his hand. Wracking his brain desperately for any solutions to their problem. They couldn't just *not* get the youngest anything, this party was supposed to make up for his life-long paucity of birthday fun. He had to think, where did they typically get what they needed when they needed them?

That seemed to be the root of the problem, the fact that they didn't normally seek out specific items to buy. Usually, things would just materialize, like the couch. Red thought harder, yarn drifting in the breeze, half-listening to the tinkle of the windchimes as he wracked his brain for ideas. Wait a tick… the windchimes.

"The closet!" Red cried aloud, startling duck.

"What?" Duck gasps, head whipping up from where he'd been quietly studying his phone, its lock screen flashing the time. Was it really half-past four already?

"We might have some stuff in the closet he'd like! He found those windchimes he loves so much in there, maybe there's something else in there as well."

"Huh. Well, you've actually had a good idea for once," Duck says slowly, gaze slipping back down to his phone, beak clicking thoughtfully. "I'm impressed."

"I always have good ideas."

"Sitting around and doing nothing all day doesn't constitute as a good idea."

"It could."

"Well, it doesn't!" Duck groans, fed up with Red's needling. "Now, would you shut *UP.* I have an idea too, you loudmouthed lump of fuzz."

"Wow," Red whistles, mentally filing this moment away as one of his favorite times he's gotten Duck to shriek at him. Heart twisting in happy little knots at the way the shortest one has to resume his fight to keep a smile off his face. "Alright then, what is it?"

"My phone!"

"Your phone?"

"Is there an echo in here? Yes, my phone! I have a shopping app!"

“I thought your phone was for emergencies only?”

“Well,” Duck sniffs, thumbing through the app. “This would fall into that category, wouldn’t it?”

“You really are an old softie,” Red says, mostly because he knows it’ll make the duck sputter and spit. Partially, because it’s true. The bird may bicker with Yellow more often than they get along, but Red knows he’s grown to care for the kid just as much as he has. It was nice to be united in the same cause of making their housemate happy, well, as happy as you can be in a place like this. Which, in all honesty, has been much easier to do as of late. With the summer air filtering in, smelling of grass and honeysuckle. The pink house filled with laughter and arguments and food smells and quiz show theme tunes and the warm glow of now-ubiquitous domesticity.

“Quiet, you.” The bird one sighs, the exhaustion that comes with speaking to his best friend obviously being felt bone deep. “It’s not like you’re any better.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

A quiet shuffling from the doorway snaps them to attention, heads whipping ‘round to catch sight of Yellow pushing his way in. Socked feet padding against the wooden floor, rubbing one eye with his small fist. He doesn’t say anything, just wanders his way over to the TV and clicks it on, fiddling with the volume and turning the channel to the same that he’d been watching in the kitchen.

“Well, hello there,” Duck says, an amused note in his voice. “Are you watching that in here now?”

“Yeh.”

“May I ask why?”

“Wanna be in here.” He says, expression bored, gaze sliding lazily between the two. He opts to settle down cross-legged on the rug, sitting in front of his two housemates rather than in his own chair at the far-end of the room. “With you, and him. Together, with me.”

“Ah,” the avian blinks rapidly, clearly touched by the answer and pretending not to be. “Did, uh, did you remember to turn off the kitchen telly? I don’t want you wasting electricity, even if it’s fake.”

“Yes,” Yellow huffs, as if put out by the question. “I know to do that.”

“Don’t get tetchy with me, I was just asking.”

“Well, I did,” The younger one huffs again, hunkering down with the clicker held protectively in his lap. “Cause you guys didn’t come back in. So, I had to come in here. And I missed some questions so- so now I’ll never know about them. Or the answers.”

“Oh, uh... Sorry about that.” The red one breaks in, having slowly come to the realization that the little one is feeling grouchy. Most likely about being left alone in the kitchen. There go those abandonment issues again, the clingy thing. “Surely they’ll come up again in reruns though, right?”

“Huh…” Yellow fiddles with the remote, turning it over and over in his grasp, brows furrowed in thought. “Didn’t think of that. I guess…I guess that’s okay then.”

“Well, crisis averted I suppose,” Duck sighs, shooting Red a look that he’s vaguely able to translate as *‘this isn’t over, when the yellow one goes to bed we’re going to scour this house from top to bottom to find anything even vaguely resembling a present, wrap them in butcher paper and some of that pink ribbon we have in the cupboard, hide them in my trunk, and then use my emergency-only cell phone to shop online for whatever else we may be able to come up with’* or something along those lines. “Don’t sit so close to the TV it’s going to ruin your eyesight. And I shan't be buying you glasses either, you’ll just smash them against the ground and be sad and blind at the same time. And I hate sad, blind people, you know that!”

“I’m won’t go blind! And- and I’m not sitting too close!”

“You are! Sit back closer to the big one, he’s at a more optimal telly-watching distance.”

Yellow simply gurgles out long, drawn-out garble of vowels, flopping bonelessly to the floor and moaning as though he’s been gutted. Carrying on like this was the trial of a lifetime he begins to flop himself along the floor, arms limply dragging his listless body towards the red one in a pale imitation of a belly-crawl. Legs kicking weakly, mouth twisted in a constant, endless frown that broadcasted his apparent hardship for all to see. Remote clacking loudly against the wooden floor as he wriggles and writhes his way across it, one hand still gripping it weakly.

Red turns to look over at the other one, wanting to see his reaction, and is met by the sight of him exasperatedly pinching the bridge of his beak. Muttering to himself under his breath about the *‘horrid, absolutely **horrid** child, constantly testing his patience’* and angrily thumping one heel against the leg of his rocker.

Unperturbed, Red looks back at Yellow, watching aloofly as the boy slumps his way up to his chair. Thumping his head against the bigger one’s foot and dramatically laying there, face down. Heaving out the biggest sigh possible, back rising and falling quickly from the exertion of his little display. Somehow managing to lay there, motionless, and still cop an attitude. A clear indication of his thoughts on Duck's request, and how completely unreasonable it was that he’d even said it in the first place.

“You done?” Red asks, amusement clear in his tone.

“Yeh,” Yellow pants, finally pushing himself upright, cheeks red. He shuffles himself backwards, so his back is pressed against the taller one’s legs, a warm, squirmy weight pushing into the red shins.

“I should hope so.” Duck cuts in, face puckered in annoyance. “And you better not have broken the FAMILY REMOTE, or I shall… I shall do…something.”

“Something?” Yellow says, tone confused. He’s pressing the entirety of his bodyweight against Red’s legs now, head lolling useless against sanguine knees. Looking at Duck from the corner of his eye like the lack of eye contact will lessen the fallout of his mini-tantrum. “What does that meant to mean?”

“It means I’ll do something.” Duck says ominously, rocking slowly in his chair.

“He’d do something.” Red repeats, reaching down to tousle the blue patch of hair connected to his favorite little idiot. “If the remote was broken, which it’s not. Now, both of you hush up. I’m trying to watch.”

He ignores the way Duck huffs about *stupid, tender-hearted fools that love to disrespect his authority*, choosing instead to continue playing with Yellow’s hair. Gently trailing his thumb along the edge of his scalp where shaved stubble and long locks connect, idly playing with the conflicting textures as he watches a special report about pest control chemicals, and how they’re actually a good thing to have in your town’s water supply.

He carries on his petting through the next six commercials, the end credits of the quiz show, and well into the next full episode. Thumb tenderly sweeping back and forth, his heavy mitt lovingly cradling the back of the boy’s head. Finally, during the next set of end credits, he glances down at the youngest, and is met with the sight of him sleeping, open-mouthed. Saved only from flopping face-first onto the floor by Red’s hand, which is still firmly holding him upright against his legs.

“Oh, hey,” He motions to Duck with his free hand. “He’s sleeping.”

“Hmm?” Duck looks up from his phone, a video of someone baking sourdough plays on, sound muted. “He’s what?”

“Sleeping.”

“Sleeping?” He perks up, craning his neck to gaze at Yellow’s slumbering form, all loose limbs and slack muscles. “Oh, that's perfect! He can’t peek if he’s asleep. Do you think you can move without waking him?”

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” Red grunts, bending down to grasp Yellow under his armpits, pulling his limp body up into his lap with little effort. The boy was still light, but the constant intake of carbs seemed to have done him some good. There was a subtle curve to his stomach, his thighs, the fat of his face, everything was more filled out than it had been. Perhaps, there was a reasoning behind the duck’s suspiciously repetitive meals after all.

He cradled the boy protectively against his chest, one arm supporting his limp body, the other curving up to cup at his face, brushing blue locks away from his closed eyes. And then, he’s gazing down into his face, softened in slumber. Cheeks round, lips parted, noisy breaths whistling out into the room and mixing with the beginnings of the night bugs songs. Crickets and katydids chirping loud, constant, like the beat of Red’s own heart. A surge of instinctual, protective, anger flushes through his body, mixing into his blood and swirling through his gut.

How could anyone look into his little face and set out to cause him intentional pain? He couldn't imagine a single person willing to do it, let alone the boy's own father. *He wasn’t even deserving of the title*, Red thought, the word burrowing like angry needle pricks in his brain when used in conjunction with Roy.

Father’s shouldn’t act like remembering their kid’s birthday was a burden, shouldn’t inflict as much pain as possible: physical, emotional, mental, you name it. Red squeezed the youngest one closer, near-invisible tremors running through his body. He’d never let it happen again, the kid could watch quiz shows until his eyes fell out and eat Smash packets every day of his life if Red had any say. And he’d go down bleeding and biting to ensure that he did.

“Are you quite alright?” Duck breaks through his thoughts, voice shrill. He’s standing in front of him now, clicking his beak worriedly, gaze calculating. “You look like you’re about to seize up. I’m not putting my wallet in your mouth if you do, it’s genuine horse leather from Sardinia, and I won’t have you biting clean through it.”

“I’m not going into a seizure,” Red groans. “I’m just thinking.”

“What in god’s name about? I thought you might pop a vessel.”

“His…him.”

“Oh,” Duck’s eyes darken, a look of pure loathing overtaking his face. “I see. Well, forget about him for now. We’re in the middle of picking up his slack, and I’d rather not waste my precious, amazingly brilliant brain cells on anything to do with him. You shouldn’t waste yours either, even if they’re not as important as mine.”

“Thanks,” Red says dryly. “Anyway, should I put this one to bed?”

“Just leave him in your chair for now, it’s plenty big enough for him to nap in while we get some things taken care of.” He shoots a meaningful look at the closest for emphasis, brows high. Flashing the bright whites of his eyes in that way that always makes him look deranged, like whenever he talked about his bloody shredder. Red just nods, easing himself upright slowly, careful not to jostle the slumbering form in his arms. Turning back to gingerly deposit Yellow in the

warmed seat of his armchair, placing his lolling head on the throw pillow with an affectionate ease, tucking his limbs in close to his body so they don't get cold.

"Personally," Duck says suddenly, almost materializing in the empty space next to Red's right hip. He's tapping away at his phone, flicking through images of lumpy-looking sack animals. "I think his father, can go *fuck himself*."

Red hisses in surprise, unused to the smallest one being so openly hostile on Yellow's behalf. The unsavory language was a bit of a shock as well, usually Duck was one for flowery insults and drawn-out speeches of disgust. Short and crass wasn't his style, and yet, Red agreed wholeheartedly. The vile man didn't deserve poetic curses, truly, he could just fuck off.

"Well then," Red bumps him lightly, hip to shoulder. "Shall we plunder the closet?"

"We shall."

Together, they walk to the hall closet. Their mood nearly somber, as though preparing themselves for what lies ahead. It's a long and arduous task, pulling out the crusty, whining boxes, sifting through the piles of bills and bank statements and last-notice envelopes that all get tossed in the back. The cavernous hollow of the top shelf, smelling of dirt and decay, shelf buckling under the weight quivering hat boxes and suspiciously heavy suitcases, all crusted with that same, staining brown scum. Filled to the brim with things they didn't feel like rifling through to throw out, moth-eaten coats and molded wellies, all in sizes they'd never be able to fit. The constant, agonizing wines that emitted from the depths of it, far back beyond where their eyes could see, forever emanating from the darkened corners and ruined floorboards. Typical closet stuff.

Their excavation efforts took the better part of forty five minutes, with Duck nearly being buried beneath a mound of old textbooks that fell from their precarious spot up top, shrieking and squawking as Red pulled him out of the way. The taller one groaning as he stepped in something wet and hairy, the warm mound pulsating and squelching beneath his foot before he kicked it away. He hated that lump, it always found the most inopportune times to be underfoot. They'd had to employ Duck's emergency phone's emergency flashlight for a few harrowing moments, digging through stacks of shoeboxes filled with things that growled and snapped as they tried to open them. Bloody rats, they'd infiltrated the house again, and Yellow refused to let them use anything other than live-traps filled with peanut butter and jam. The kid had such a bleeding heart.

In the end, they'd found an impressive array of goodies for the little one: a few coloring books (featuring natural disasters, extinct animals, and instances of grain entrapment) a slightly sticky box of 120 crayons that Duck had to pry from the mouth of a very large, very angry rat (it had hissed at them, but Red hissed back louder, with more teeth), a notebook with blank pages and the image of a technicolor lion eating a rainbow gazelle on the cover (sparkly, neon blood staining its face, peace signs and yin-yang symbols mixed into the gore, both animals staring out at them with huge, iridescent eyes), a deck of cards with suits made up of farm animals (the king queen and jack being the farmer, his wife, and their farmhands), and a brand new packet of Sherbet Lemons.

It was actually a pretty good haul, Red thought, as he and Duck stood in the kitchen, windows open, the mauvy light of early evening pooling in. They worked quickly, snipping bits of butcher paper to size, Duck folding it in crisp lines and corners, sellotape sticking tackily to Red's mitts. Long pulls of pink ribbon measured out and snipped as well, tied into bows with a flourish, all the while Duck scrolled through his phone, scouring through grainy images of potential presents.

"Do you think he'd like something like this?" Duck asks, extending his arm upwards towards Red, phone in hand. An image of a lumpy, sad-looking ragdoll was blown up across the screen, a permanent frown stitched into its feedsack face. It looked solemnly sorrowful.

"I don't think so," Red says, quickly minimizing the photo. He turns back to tie the last ribbon around the package of candy, opting not to wrap it in paper at all.

"There! What about that one!"

Red stares at the image blown up on the screen, taking in the misshapen body and strange, square head. It's mottled pink and green, with exposed white bits that seem to hint at a boney interior. The text below described it simply as a 'zombie pigman.'

"It looks rotted."

"What? No it doesn't! It has green spots, like his favorite color." Duck preens a little, never one to gloss over the fact that Yellow preferred his main hue over Red's.

"We'll I'm your favorite color, and I don't think I'd like a chickenpocked swine doll as a gift."

"Wh-whatever," Duck grumbled, less eager to gloat now at the mention of his own favorite shade and the connection it has to his housemate. "That's different."

"Hey, what about that one?" Red drags his finger across the phone, painstakingly slow, swiping to a new listing and expanding the image to full screen. It's another cubic hog doll, this one larger and pinker. The picture displays it as being slumped forward, rectangular legs apparently unable to hold its bulging frame, eyes a strange doublet of black and white squares. It's lumpy, and sort of pathetic looking, sadly unable to stand on its own. It's perfect.

“That one? But it’s so…sloppy looking.”

“It’s big and soft,” Red says, brows quirked. “I’m telling you, he’ll love it.”

“Spoken like a man who’s big and soft.”

“Exactly,” he grins, nudging the duck again with his hip. “I’m an expert at these sorts of things.”

“What? Sloppy toy hog purchases?”

“Yep,” Red pops his p, tapping to another image of the pig creature looking sad. Fat body slouching down on itself enough to rest its face against the white ground, legs splayed out uselessly to the side. “It’s perfect.”

“Well…if you say so.” Duck begins to gather the gifts in his arms, paper crinkling. “Go ahead and buy it, it has next-day shipping so it should be here in the morning.”

“Really? Just like that?”

“Yes, really. It’s how I order my Jammie Dodgers without the little pig getting into them. It’ll be on the stoop tomorrow when we wake up, trust me.”

“Okay,” Red jabs the ‘buy’ button, and a pixelated shower of confetti congratulates him on his purchase, informing him to be on the lookout for delivery ‘as soon as you can imagine’ which is slightly ominous, but whatever. He’d gotten the perfect gift. It made his stomach squirmy with joy just to think about, a feeling that was nearly foreign to his big body. It was a nice change to have his stomach twisting and writhing in giddy turns, rather than knotting itself up in pure fear and dread. He could grow very used to this.

“I’ve bought it.” He announces to Duck, who has just returned from stashing the gifts in his trunk, beak cracking open into a wide yawn.

“Ehh? Oh, good.” He yawns again, stretching his arms widely. Red watches as he does so, cheeks heating up as he stares at the sliver of green feathers that’s exposed as the tweed fabric of Duck’s jacket is pulled up at the motion. “I think that’s enough party planning for tonight. What do you say we make the cake tomorrow? We could serve it after dinner, and you could put the bunting up while he’s having a shower. Might as well end the day with it rather than start it, I think the excitement will help put him to sleep.”

“Tomorrow sounds good,” Red says, fighting to keep his voice casual. He slips Duck’s phone back into his outstretched hand, watching as the bird shuts it down and stuffs it back into his pocket. There’s a twitchy excitement beginning to grip itself around his heart, all their hard work was going to pay off, very soon. “He’ll definitely need the help getting to sleep, I think. After all, he nodded off tonight at half past five. He’s probably going to be up early.”

“Ugh, probably.” Duck sighs, “We should probably get him into his real bed now, and us as well. Tomorrows going to be busy.”

“Yeah,” Red yawns now too, exhaustion settling into his bones at the mention of bed, like a trigger phrase had been activated in his brain. “You can go ahead, I’ll go get him.”

“If you say so.” the smallest one replies, flicking off the light and plunging the house into relative darkness. The glow of the TV still flickers in the sitting room, and the shadows dance and twist in the warm night air. He ambles off in the direction of the bedroom as Red returns to his chair, gazing down at the little, yellow lump that still occupies it. He’s snoring now, quietly, muffled snuffling noises escaping his parted lips. One hand gripping tight to the front of his overalls, the other slipped under his own head, legs drawn in lazy curves near his chest.

The sight is so adorable it gives Red pause, taking in the absolute relaxation on Yellow’s sleeping face. The kid felt safe, he realized, no longer nervous and twitchy in sleep. He slept soundly, hard and deep, body motionless aside from the rise and fall of his chest. Red feels his heart wince as he bends to gather the boy into his arms once again, gently tucking him close to his chest as he flicks off the TV. Walking slowly in the dark, operating on autopilot, listening to the whistling intakes of breath.

Finally, he’s reaching the bedroom, quietly closing the door behind him, his eyes searching out Duck. He finds him by Yellow’s bed, the boy’s pajamas in hand, duvet already turned down. Red lays the boy down over the covers, and they spend a harrowing few moments helping the grumpy child out of his overalls and into his pajamas, voice a slurred whine of complaints and demands to just leave him alone and let him sleep. And then, he’s all dressed and bundled in bed, immediately rolling over and falling back asleep, head buried under the covers.

“I think today was quite the success actually.” Duck says, flicking the yellow one’s nightlight on.

“I agree.” Red says back, turning off the big light. Again, he’s plunged into semi-darkness, the glimmering rays of moonlight stretching across the floor. Window open, crickets singing, the faint tinkle of windchimes carrying on the breeze. It’s quite beautiful out tonight, actually. Here in the bedroom, speaking with Duck in muted tones. He feels an all-consuming urge to say something, just to crystallize the moment into something real, something tangible.

“I, uh, I sort of… sort of had fun really.” He coughs, forcing the words out before embarrassment is able to choke them back down. He doesn’t really know why he says it, other than the fact that it’s the truth. It had been fun, spending

time with Duck, working together with a common goal in mind, bickering and laughing the whole way. It was one of the nicest days he can ever remember having.

"Heh, really?" Duck laughs quietly, watching Red cross the room to his bed, comfortably nestled in his own. Body illuminated by the moonlight, spilling in through the window and onto his blankets. He looks almost as if he's glowing, backlit in pale, shimmering radiance. "Well, I sort of had fun with you too."

"That's good." Red hums, face burning. "Well…goodnight then."

"Goodnight." Duck yawns, voice warbling. "Sleep well."

"I'll try," the bigger one says, mostly to himself as he slips onto his stomach, face buried in his pillow. He felt strange. Exhausted and excited all at once, his body heavy with sleep and yet thrumming with nervous energy. He was nearly too excited to sleep, his mind rocketing around at a million miles an hour, reminding him of all the things he had to do tomorrow.

Tomorrow, Red thought to himself. Yellow's first birthday was going to be tomorrow. They had a plan, and presents, and they were going to make a cake and sing the song and everything.

It was going to be perfect, Red would make sure of that.

Notes:

When I tell you I fucking SCOWERED the entirety of the Youtube videos and the Channel 4 series to find any evidence of stuffed animals existing in the DHMIS universe 😭 I finally found a weird doll in Lily and Todney's room only visible in the overhead shot so, like, that counts. Yellow can have his big ass Minecraft pig plushie because you cannot tell me Yellow wouldn't love playing Minecraft, he'd have a combination pig/flower farm with bees and frogs and the whole shebang, I know it.

Here's what Yellow's pig looks like 💗 https://myshredda.tumblr.com/post/701383790437826560/reference-image-for-the-fic

Yellow coming in and finding his two weirdo surrogate family members flirting shamelessly in the sitting room after abandoning him in the kitchen: Really? Right in front of my salad?

PS: Sorry for the lateness, I hope the word count makes up for it!

Chapter 3 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/43026237/chapters/109153080): parties and families

Summary:

"Happy birthdaaaaaaaaay tooooo yooooooooooooou," Red croons, wincing as Duck hits notes higher than he thought possible. "Make a wish, kid."

"Yes and do start to blow out your candles!" Duck cackles. "We shan't be helping, so you better get to work!"

Yellow sat, still and steady, eyes locked on the dancing light of countless candles. Soft planes of his face covered in a dusting of shadows and the gentle, rhythmic glow of fire buffeted in the breeze. The flickering flames casting his features in a constant, radiant movement. Slowly, he looks up, liquid dark eyes brimmed with confusion, bottom lip beginning to quiver.

"For- for me?" His voice wavers, as if unable to comprehend this small a kindness could be extended to him.

Notes:

Hello 🧍‍♀️

Well, this certainly took much, MUCH longer than planned! I developed a nasty head cold over Thanksgiving that actually turned out to be RSV, and it really cut into my fanfiction writing schedule lol. To make up for the long wait, I ended up writing way more than originally planned, so I hope a 15k chapter is a good enough consolation.

So!!! The birthday fic comes to a close! This has been one of my favorite writing experiences I think I've ever gone through (minus the whole being sick part) so it's kind of bittersweet to be finishing this one 😥 It's definitely the most fluffy thing I've ever written, so I hope it's not too OOC.

Also, I'd like to send out a HUUUUGE thank you to all the lovely people on tumblr that have read my wips and given me writing advice and sent wonderful, encouraging messages. They've basically been my personal cheerleaders through this entire endeavor and I literally could not have finished this fic without them 💗

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_3_endnotes).)

Red wakes early, as expected. Eyes blinking open casually, as though the time between evening and morning had been crossed in a flutter of lashes. Excitement taking up all the space in his head that was usually reserved for drowsiness, thoughts already plugging along at a succinct clip.

He lies there for a moment, blankets rumpled, yarn fanning out from his head like rays from the sun, staring up at the pink confetti ceiling. Peppered with weakly glowing stars that Yellow had begged to put up, blu-tack sticking to his fingers, the stars, Red's yarn, Duck's tweed shorts. Eyes huge, bottom lip plumping, pleading with the only member of the household tall enough to reach if he could please, please, *please*, stick them to bits of roof above the beds; all their beds, not just his own. Ignoring the duck's shrieking about dry cleaning costs and his hatred of sticky materials, hand outstretched, plastic stars gripped tight in his tacky, little fist.

Of course Red had done it, how could he not?

So, he lay there, mind twisting and spinning and informing him of all the things he'd have to do today to ensure a perfect party, half focusing on the now, half lost in the past. Still standing on his toes and sticking palm-sized bits of phosphorus plastic to the flat expanse above his bed, Yellow clinging to his hand, trying to help him balance. The sound of Duck throwing an absolute tizzy over the blue stains on the seat of his short trousers still filtering through his thoughts, shrill demands of payment for a replacement pair being met with the reminder that their income was shared. He'd raged his way to the kitchen then, goose stepping out into the chilled silence of the rest of their…where they lived.

That had been so long ago, Red realized, back before the niceness took hold. Perhaps even back as far as the teacher times. Decades and centuries and eons ago, before they'd began to act softer, speak kinder, when fear and apathy had a permanent, icy grip on his throat. Back before family dinners and movie nights, before hugs and headbutts and finally, *finally* feeling the sensation they'd come to know as 'safe.' A feeling that had been so foreign to them all, Yellow had thought his body was shutting down and wondered aloud if he was starting to die.

Way back, before all of that, sticking stars to the ceiling had been the first nice thing Red could ever remember doing for the strange, yellow thing that he lived with. The one that had slowly wormed his way into taking up one-half of his heart (the other belonging to the viridescent bird who had been nearly catatonic with rage over his stained shorts, of course.) Staring up at those small stars, innocently absorbing the morning rays in preparation for the upcoming evening. Thinking back on his casual gesture, the way he'd so easily slipped his mitt into Yellow's grasping hand, even then. When the threat of teacher-induced limb removal had been a very real possibility, an urge to be kind still flickered in his chest, like a quick glance into a future he'd never thought possible.

And now, here he was. Healthy and whole, of body, maybe of mind. Partially of soul, if he even had one, but most definitely of body. Perhaps healthier than he'd been even back during his office days, when weight had been stacked on from stress, from boredom, picking glints of diamond out between sharp molars. Now, he was mainly filled with home cooked meals, potatoes and pasta, easy and starchy, a warm comfort after a long day with his silly little family. Happy weight, he'd come to call it, softening his belly, his cheeks, the curve of his arms. Cuddly, Yellow had said, he's cuddly now. No longer made up of lithe, ropey muscles tensed beneath trembling skin, ready to bolt at a moment's notice. Body in survival mode, burning every calorie available to feed the spiraling fear in his gut. No, now he was plump, lazy, content to sit around. Fat and happy, for the first time in his life.

There was a loud thump then, a sharp noise that broke him from his self-reflection. It came from the direction of the front door, as if a large box had been dropped on the stoop.

That would be the pig then.

Groaning inaudibly, as to not disturb his still slumbering clumpmates, he pushes himself upright. Swinging thick legs over the edge of his messy bed, feet chilled at the cool touch of the wooden floor. He should really make the bed, Duck would have a fit if he left it in its current state of disarray, but he didn't want to risk waking the birthday boy.

And wasn't that a funny thought? On a random morning in the middle of summer, arching fingers of humidity already slipping in the open window, Yellow would finally have a birthday. One they'd chosen, all on their own. It was almost as if life were starting anew, a fragile seedling of pale green, a party draped in citrusy trails of lemon-lime fabric. Though years of neglect wouldn't slink off like a feral animal, hissing, crawling, belly pressed low to the ground, perhaps the memories would soften. Overshadowed by newer, happier moments, filled with good foods and laughter and gifts. Like the pig.

Red yawned, loud, jaw cracking, yarn falling away from his gaping maw as he leaned backwards. Arms extended above his head, hands curled into fists, a loud pop emanating from his lower back. God that felt delicious. He shuffles over towards the middle of the room, the middle bed, a wooden Y of raised wood dappled in the morning light. Yellow is still

asleep, face down, body a soft lump beneath his duvet. He snores softly, mouth open, pillow damp from the outpouring of drool that seeped during the night. Sleeping like a rock, as usual.

That was good, Red thought, as he smoothed the blankets back over his exposed shoulder. The longer he slept the less likely he was to figure out what was going on. He kept his mitt on the boy's shoulder for another moment, feeling the slow rise and fall of sleepy breaths, half-congested from the chillier air of nighttime. A quiet conformation of life, of how time moved forever onward, now that it wasn't looped into a noose of repeating days, slowly tightening around his throat.

One last pat and he shuffled on, sights set on the third bed. Duck was facing the window, his back to Red, feathered head barely visible from beneath his blankets. It was a strangely intimate thing, to see Duck so still, so vulnerable. Lost in dreams, unaware that Red's large form loomed on, watching. Made him feel like a creep, standing there, observing his slumbering form. Red turned, embarrassed, as if he were at risk of being caught. He moved on, to their battered door, gingerly easing it open and slipping out. Leaving it ajar as he went, knowing he'd be back in a moment.

The house was silent, as expected. The two loudest occupants not yet awake, the telly still off, it was too early for noise. He padded through the hallway, footsteps creaking the floorboards, a growling yawn crawling out of his mouth. One time, after the younger one had spent the day watching animal documentaries, he'd told Red he reminded him of a lion. All big teeth and long hanks of hair, a lazy demeanor concealing a protective streak kilometers wide. Privately, he'd been very pleased at the comparison, doubly so when Duck had shrieked out that *he* was the most lionesque of the group and demanded to be recognized as such. Stupid bird, Red thought, a familiar fondness nestling in his chest as he recalled the memory. He'd reached the kitchen now, fiddling with the jar of coffee grounds, it was a newer brand called *Beanies*, which Duck had picked out last Tesco trip. It promised to taste of caramelized biscuit, but it was mostly just sweet and nutty.

The familiar sounds and smells of the drip pot began to fill the kitchen as he switched it on, a gurling hiss accompanied by the cozy smell of the light roast. It mixed with the fresh morning air, filling Red's lungs full to bursting with the notes of damp grass and the sweet, hot aroma of brewing coffee. A beautiful day, dew glistening in the leaves, shimmering like crystalized bits of sugar in the morning light. Red unlocked the door, glancing at the mirror as he did so. He looked happy, happier than he'd been during that disastrous photo with his old family. The ones from before that hated his smiles and ignored his outbursts when his joy was too exuberant to conceal. Strangely, his reflection didn't bother him like it would have before. Where anxiety used to fester at the thought of disappointing them, now, he simply felt peaceful. It was a lovely morning, after all.

A large, brown box sat innocently on the front stoop, nondescript, covered in a few stamps depicting famous plane crashes rendered beautifully in delicate watercolors. Had they bought it second hand? Red couldn't remember. The stamps were nice enough, he could peel them off and give them to Yellow after the party. Maybe the little guy could start a stamp collection in his new notebook. Red felt his heart flutter at the thought, excitement crawling up from his belly in warm waves, body combating the foggy chill of early morning. He stood on the stoop, box under his arm, gazing out at the green hills and forests that surrounded the pink house. Trees shimmering like beetle shells, wet leaves verdant and jewel-like as the sun rose higher in the sky. A happy sigh escaped his lungs, as the hot smell of coffee wafted out the open window and drifted away. Lost in the symphony of wet earth, of grass, of mossy trees and warm dirt. The smells of life.

It truly was a wonderful day for a birthday, and the thought made him feel giddy, childish. Excitement bubbling into a joyous knot in the center of his chest, growing larger and larger as he re-entered the house. As if it were something for him, his own excitement, his own birthday. Sometime, between oven chip lunches and midnight movie marathons, he'd come to care very deeply about the boy, and Yellow's happiness had transferred itself into being Red's own. It felt strange, mulling it over in his mind as he set the box on the table, meticulously peeling the tape off the outer lips of folded cardboard. To care so deeply for someone, to have the room in his thoughts and his heart for something other than panicked self-preservation. Room for love, for unclouded affection, for the interest in another's happiness.

And yet, here he stood, pulling a deformed cubic hog from a box, inspecting its floppy form. It looked even more pathetic in person, a plump, doe-eyed, sadly scant thing. Slumping over weakly in his grasp, like it needed protecting from the cruelties of the world. A soft hand, an owner with a gentle, caring nature. Perfect, Red beamed to himself, heart twisting and jerking in unabashed joy. Absolutely, unbelievably, perfect.

The joy stayed put as he poured out two steaming mugs, settling comfortably over his shoulders like a favorite sweater. Not that he was inclined enough to wearing clothes to have any favorites, besides, the few items he had worn in the past weren't likely to fit him now. Happy weight and all that. He set aside a third striped mug, to be filled later with milk and the barest splash of coffee. The pig watched as puttered around the kitchen, dull, checkerboard eyes staring out into the strengthening light of the day. Stoically accepting its fate as it was caught up in a red fist, neatly wrapped into a lumpy bundle of butcher paper and pink ribbon. Carried, placidly, through the house, to the hallway, slipped in through the buckled bedroom door and placed near-silently into the trunk at the end of Duck's bed.

Speaking of Duck, the lump of blankets and feathers began to stir. Awoken by the pitched creek of the opening trunk, blinking awake, mumbling threats for cheeky buggers to stay out of his personal belongings if they knew what was best for

them.

"Shh, shush," Red whispers, voice rumbling low in his throat. "It's just me."

"Hghnmg," Duck moans, not at all in a whisper. Voice a tired slur of angry vowels clashing into continents unintelligibly, jumbled across a half-slumbering tongue. *"Get away."*

"Quiet! You'll wake him."

"Whoooooo?"

"The- him! The other one," Red hisses, leaning to clasp at the lump he assumed was a shoulder. Gently shoving at him, hoping to summon the bird fully into the waking world. "Remember him?"

"*Ehh*, stop that," Duck growls, suddenly poking his head out from beneath his duvet. Eyes bleary, beak set angrily. "You brute. Don't shake me!"

"Don't be like that," Red cuts a glance to the middle bed, searching for any signs of stirring. He finds none. "I've made coffee, that biscuit one you like. Toffee or caramel or whatever."

That gets his attention, face softening down into something more akin to excited rather than agitated.

"You've made coffee? Drip or instant?"

"Drip."

"Goodie!" Duck lurches upright, slipping from beneath the covers and out onto the floor. He's rumpled, nightshirt askew, crown feathers fluffed into some rather impressive bed head. "I'll be right there. Shall we wake the boy?"

"Do you think we should?"

"Well, he'll hardly be able to sleep tonight." The avian begins rummaging through his drawers, pulling out his tweed ensemble, neatly folded with crisp lines. Red turns around quickly, embarrassment flushing hotly through his blood at the thought of watching Duck undress. He nods jerkily, and Duck just prattles on, albeit more reserved than normal. "And I won't have him whining and crying about how tired he is tomorrow. My sensitive ears can't handle whining, you know that."

"They seem immune to self-inflicted whinging." Red grumbles, good-naturedly.

"What? What does that mean?"

"Nothing," the taller one cuts in. "Are you dressed yet?"

"Yes," Duck pads by him, fully dressed, tail bobbing away. He's playing with something in his pocket, tucking it out of eyesight before Red can figure out what it is. "Obviously. Shall I?"

"Wake him? Sure." Red watches as the bird saunters over to the middle bed, placing his hand directly on the yellow one's head and jiggling it around. "Wh- Not like that!"

"Why not," Duck asks, now patting Yellow's cheek casually. Grinning back at Red as Yellow sputters and coughs, eyes still glazed with sleep. "He's awake now, isn't he?"

"Whahappen'n," Yellow slurs, reaching up to grapple with Duck's hand. Weakly grasping at the thin wrist and trying to tug it away from his face. "Wha's goin' on?"

"It's time to get up now, lazy thing." Duck grins at Red as he ambles over. Hand still trapped in the Yellow one's gripping fingers, making no move to tug it free. "Did you want to sleep all day?"

"Yes," Yellow grouches, head flopping back onto his pillow. "M'tired."

"Well, you'll be even more tired tomorrow if you sleep today away." A green hand still cups at one yellow cheek, fingers splayed tenderly across his face. Then, he gives the smooth cheek a quick pop, batting at him like a playful cat. "Can't have you ruining the nightly schedule, can we?"

"But I wanna *sleeeeeeeeeep*." Yellow is moaning pitifully now, anguish writhing across his soft face. Red can't help but smile at the theatrics, the boy reminding him for all the world of Duck. The same whinging tone, the same screwed-shut eyes, misery leaking into every nook and cranny of his face. A mirror image of the bird when he'd felt as though he'd been disrespected, or his latest meal had turned out subpar. It was strange, watching them bicker, catching all the tics and words that were shared between them. They'd been together long enough for little quirks to slip across the divide, body language and speech patterns becoming normal enough to be shared between them all. The familiarity of family traits, even ones forged without blood.

"You can sleep when you're dead," Duck says helpfully, one finger prodding at the boy's closed eye. "Come on, chop chop. I'll even let you have some of my coffee, you've caught me in a generous mood!"

"I was going to give him coffee already," Red grumbles, swatting the green fingers away from Yellow's face. "Stop picking at him."

"Don't be such a wet hen," the shortest one grouses, but he gently smooths his hand over the yellow one's hair, as if in apology. "He loves it when I do this. Don't you?"

"Not really," Yellow groans, cracking one eye to glare up at the other two.

“Lies, you love it. And you also love coffee and wearing your pajamas all day.” Duck keeps patting Yellow’s cheek, his hair, hand moving in circuit to keep the boy on the right side of the waking world. “So why don’t we go have a spot of coffee before you get dressed, eh? That would be nice.”

That gets the other two's full attention. Yellow’s eyes snapping open, fully awake now, casting a confused glance up at Red. It was met only with a twin look of bewildered shock, Red’s brows high in the air. There was an unspoken rule in their house, one that stated that those who were inclined to wear pajamas were required to change out of them before venturing out of the bedroom, lest they wanted to be met with the almighty wrath of Duck. Subjected to a grueling lecture about proper daytime attire, and the unfathomable rudeness that was the act of lounging about in your bedclothes.

“You’re gonna let me in the kitchen? With my- in my…my jammies? But you hate when I do that!”

“Well, I just said you could, didn’t I?” Duck’s words are haughty, but his tone comes out soft. Mushy-hearted, as Yellow would say. Bordering on fondly affectionate. It makes an emotion Red can’t place well up in his chest, in his throat, summoning a lump there. If he were feeling foolish, he might say it was something akin to love, glowing like a hot coal, pure white and radiating heat out through his veins. Stoked by the mellow hand of contentment, fed kindlings of joy at the sight of his two favorite idiots playing nice. A sight that had the potential of being grown very used to.

“Why’s he being nice?” Yellow ignores Duck’s cooed tones, worry etched deep in the lines of his face, in the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. He gazes up at Red solemnly, as if ready to accept the inevitable answer with a stiff upper lip. “Am I dying?”

“No, you’re not dying! What on *earth* is wrong with you? I can be nice!” Duck gasps, a look of aghast insult overtaking his face. He turns to Red, hands on his hips. “Tell him how nice I can be.”

“He’s letting you drink coffee in your pajamas on a weekday.” Red intones, attempting to delicately steer the conversation back into more neutral territory. “I would consider that to be nice.”

“Okay.” Yellow says, suspiciously. Squinting up at his two housemates with a significant amount of skepticism in his gaze, an impressive feat for someone still swaddled in stripy bedclothes.

“Alright, the coffee I’ve poured is sure to be cold if you two keep carrying on.” Red gently ushers the bird away from Yellow, nudging him to stand at his usual spot near his right hip. “Come on now, up you get.” He slips one large mitt into Yellow’s hand, tugging the boy upright, sharing a giggle as the duvet twists itself around his small torso. Duck reaches forward then and untangles the boy, briskly adjusting his rumpled pajamas into a more presentable state.

“But what about my blankets? And my pillow?” Yellow asks, happily allowing himself to be tugged around by Duck’s fussing hands. “My bed isn’t made.”

“I suppose you can leave it for now, mine’s in a right state as well.” The tallest one grins down at Duck, smile growing wider as he watches the avian peer over at the mess that was his bed and roll his eyes.

“You two,” Duck says, a deep sigh pulling up from the depths of his chest. “Are absolutely, hopelessly, addicted to slobbery.” He smooths a hand across Yellow’s hair, attempting to flatten it down. It springs back up cheerfully, blue locks tangling together into an impressive mass that looks a bit like a tumbleweed. Duck huffs loudly, pushing Yellow towards the door. “I cannot begin to deal with you both this morning, my blood pressure can’t take it. So no, you don’t have to make your bed. You’re lucky I’m in a good mood.”

Red and Duck both wince as the boy breaks into happy shrieks, echoing behind him as he tears off into the hallway. Voice bouncing off the walls, the ceiling, fading as he reaches the kitchen. Duck harrumphs quietly, glaring at the messy bed for a moment.

“I am very nice.” He says, not looking at Red. Arms crossed, tail deathly still. “I would say I’m the nicest one here!”

“You are.” Red agrees, dropping a heavy hand on his shoulder. Affably prodding him out the door and into the hallway. “When you aren’t biting or complaining or lecturing or nagging about respect, you’re quite sweet.”

“Shut up! You deserve every bite you get,” the shortest one growls, annoyance soaking into his every word. There’s a glint in his eye, however, he’s unable to smother, infectious amusement sparkling in the early light. His tail starts to bob, slowly, a steady swish of rectrices feathers. “As does he.”

“If you say so.” Red hums, inhaling the sweet aroma of coffee and sweet summer grass as they enter the kitchen. Starting in shock at the sight of Yellow fiddling with the empty cardboard box that still sat on the table. Shit.

“What’s this? What came?” He asks, happily folding and unfolding the flaps from open to closed. Duck makes a strangled gasping noise, hand coming up to grip at Red’s hip in horror. The sharp dig of his fingers snaps Red out of his stupor, blurting out the first excuse that comes to mind.

“Taxes.” He wheezes, voice aiming for casual. “It had taxes in it. For, uh, for the petrol charges. And also…also, uh, income taxes. From the income.”

“Oh, okay” Yellow nods, interest immediately lost. “Can I have a coffee now?”

“Sure,” Red shares a relieved glance with Duck. He’s released Red’s leg, bringing both hands up to rub at his forehead. Clearly exasperated, he collapses down into his chair, forehead still cupped in one hand, elbow resting on the

table. Red's pretty sure he hears him mutter *morons* to himself, but one can't be entirely sure. He bustles off, retrieving the third mug from their set, running his thumb over the indented diamond of lemon yellow inset in its lip. Busying himself with filling the mug mostly full with whole fat milk, the bubbling froth of white, creamy film rising up nearly to the open mouth. Splashing in a few inches of coffee, enough to mix the drink to a light beige. Just the way Yellow likes it.

Duck's finally looking at him again by the time he makes it back to the table, beak clicking slowly, like he was working over a mouthful of particularly sinewy flesh. Eyes lidded, not in annoyance, but in thought. Half-watching as Red sets Yellow's mug down on the table. A small smile blooming as Yellow gleefully drinks his milky coffee, cup grasped in both hands, a mustache of foam revealed as he lowers the mug from his lips.

Duck laughs then, one sharp *'Ha!'* escaping his beak. And Red joins along, nervous energy bubbling up and out of his chest as he chuckles away. Yellow simply continues on drinking his drink, legs swinging beneath the table in a leisurely tempo, back and forth, back and forth. Grinning to himself as his housemates settle in, sun casting long peels of golden light across the room as it climbs ever higher in the sky.

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The rest of the morning slips by quickly. Duck reading his newspaper, Red carefully stowing the empty box in the closet, Yellow switching the TV onto some morning news program. Listening intently as the frozen-faced newscaster speaks about the latest trends in botox technology, clearly something he had a great interest in. Yellow nods along, thoughtfully sipping his drink as he mulls over the pros and cons of coal-based cheek implants and kerosene teeth whitening treatments. Gleefully piping up with completely incorrect suggestions whenever Duck requests help on a particular tricky crossword. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, gazing up at Red with his usually pleading puppy-dog eyes and requesting if he could maybe please refill his coffee? With more milk this time, please and thank you? His voice singsonging its way around the bird calls and windchimes and thunderous applause from the studio audience, seemingly in agreeance with the host's opinion on using more lead in lip fillers to get that naturally rosy hue.

Red agrees easily, just as he did all that time ago, blu-tack sinking deep into the fur of his hands. Laugh lines gathering about the corners of his eyes, his face softened as he watched Yellow happily swinging his legs, tongue curling up to worry at the foam still clinging to his lip. Boy of the hour, the whole day really, and he didn't even know it. Absently pouring more milk, fatty and rich, another splash of coffee, more sugar than anything else. Drifting back to the table, cupping the azure locks at the nape of his neck, a smile returned, a grumbled question from Duck, wondering what would fit six-across, friend of Wallace?

They didn't know, Yellow suggests Engelbert Humperdinck, Red cheerfully agrees. Duck shoos them away with the paper itself, dubbing them horrifically ignorant in the art of crossword. Time ticked on, sun rising higher and higher, warm light flowing in and out of the windows on lofty currents of air. Lunch drew near, and Red wondered if they might have a bite of spaghetti. And didn't they have a frozen bag of meatballs and other various organs in the deep freeze? And some tins of red sauce? It would be a nice lunch, and rather easy too. Yellow pipes up then, glancing up from the sports section that Duck had slipped his way, finger trailing down an article about concussions and their advantages on and off the field, agreeing wholeheartedly with the suggestion. He loves pasghetti, it was his favorite! Who would have thought!

Internally, Red preens at how well his mind games were going, wiggling his eyebrows teasingly at Duck as the bird agreed to the lunch plans. His smile growing ever wider as the bird exasperatedly shrieks at him to stop, as Yellow demands the other two to shut up and stop talking over the program.

The sun moves on and on, casting the beginnings of shadows as they boil water and heat red sauce in a saucepan. Yellow gleefully ripping open the bag of meatballs and other various organs, quickly popping an eye into his mouth before Duck could stop him, cheeks round, smile wide. Giggling as Duck lectures him about the risks of salmonella and troutella and all the other types of fish-based-ellas that could make him sick. The bird pointedly ignoring Red's helpful input about their bag of various ball-shaped meats and how it didn't have any fish products in it, they'd bought the extra-large lent-free value pack on sale last Tesco trip. The water boils, noodles soften, two or three limp strands were flicked against the cabinet by Red, sticking there tackily as Yellow cheers and Duck scolds.

"You're going to clean that up!" He shrieks, but he's grinning too. Smacking Yellow's grasping hand with the flat of his wooden spoon, flicking him away from the sizzling meat in an automatic motion. The movement coming easily to him now, practiced, familiar. Their time spent cooking together easing him into comfortable autopilot, mindlessly going through a hundred little motions without even thinking of doing them.

Yellow simply brings his knuckles up to his mouth, nibbling at the tender flesh around a grin. Eyes bright, looking comfortably underdressed in his pajamas and bare feet. Happily collecting the plates from the cupboard under Red's watchful gaze and hovering hands, poised easily behind, ready to catch any tumbling plateware. Gently guiding the boy back to the stove, plates balanced in his grasp, before depositing them on the counter.

His face lighting up as Duck slaps noodles on the plates, the now-combined sauce and meat, the cheese Duck had pulled from the fridge. Dancing from one foot to the other as Red carries his plate to the table, followed by his own, then

Duck's. More cups are brought out, filled to the brim with sparkly lemonade, a sheen of citrus smells mixing in with the heat of sauce and hearty smells of meat and cheese. Warm air pouring in, more than they could ever hope to breathe in, ingesting the very essence of summer, of sweet hay and fresh breezes, blazing, endless humid heat and the wet pull of earth.

There's a sense of ease winding through the meal, ribbon-like and delicate, twisting here and there and back again. It's easy to sit, to eat, for Red to fill his belly with the lovely warmth of food made in tandem. Many hands making light, delicious, work. The clink of forks and beak and teeth playing out softly, mixing with bird song and wind and the ever-present ticking of the sitting room clock. It's hands moving quickly, suddenly, the light of the day growing shorter, shadows growing longer. It was past noon now, somehow, angling closer to supper. Had they been eating that long? It felt almost as if the day was rushing towards its close, growing closer to the all-important finale. The party.

Duck noticed the late hour then too, glancing up at the clock. Squawking about the lateness of the hour, beak clicking faster and faster as the realization of the time dawned over him. Clipped orders for Red to wash the dishes and Yellow to wash himself, finally requesting for him to change out of his pajamas and into his day clothes.

"I mean it," He squawks, hands on his hips. "Go wash up. Your hair, your face, your body, everything. And then go make your bed."

"Awwwwwwwww," Yellow moans, pouting crawling across his face. "Can't I just- just leave them on? 'S'almost night time anyway…"

"No, no, no, no, *no!* " Duck's nervous energy is infecting his words now, hands shaking as they rested against his hips. Something Red would never have noticed in the years and months and seconds before now. Back then, he never really noticed anything at all. Too engrossed in his own misery to catch the tells of the other's moods, their anger and anguish and joy and love all a foreign concept to him. Something that potentially existed, but on the cusp his existence, pushed back to make room for the more pressing concepts of life or death. "You need to be clean for- for tonight. You can't go to bed covered in sauce!"

"But it's not bedtime yet!" The youngest one protests, face painted with annoyance and a slightly concerning amount of tomato sauce.

"I don't care, you're to do as I say!" Duck shakes Red's hand off his shoulder, glaring into the cupboard as he stashes away the lunch dishes. His beak is clicking so rapidly now it's like he's coding messages in morse, shoulders hunched, constantly glancing at the clock. "It's for your own good."

"But- but… *Augh!"* Yellow stamps his foot, arms crossed. The theatrics of his anger lessened a bit by the continued presence of sauce. Stomping off down the hall, muttering to himself about pushy, mean birds and their grouchy moods. Red, reaching and pulling the last dried noodle off the cabinet and flicking it into the overflowing bin, calls out to the boy's retreating back.

"Try not to get the shampoo in your eyes tonight, please!"

"But it says no more tears!" Is the boy's echoed reply, voice distorting down the hallway from the bathroom.

"I don't care what it says, it burns your eyes every time you do it!"

Finally, Red is met with only stony, sullen acceptance. Yellow muttering an 'okay' loud enough to be heard down the hallway, and then, nothing at all. Turning back, he's greeted by the sight of Duck frantically mixing up a boxed cake mix. Funfetti flavor, with little sprinkles shaped like bugs and worms and things. The box included bright pink frosting and a blood-red, gelatinous packet of filling for between the layers.

"Do you need any help?"

"No…Yes, uh, preheat the oven, will you? One-eighty, I think." Duck's hands still shake as he stirs in oil and eggs and whatever else is needed for the cake. "I can't believe I let time slip away like this. It's nearly five. Wasn't it just noon?"

"Something like that," Red agrees absently, fiddling with the heating dial. "I don't think there's a rush, though."

"Isn't there? We still have to finish the cake, get the decorations, put up the decoration, get it all perfect in here before he comes out, and he- he-" Duck breaks off, glaring at the cherry red box of cake mix from its innocent perch on the counter. His beak clicking and clacking around his words, rendering them garbled and near-incomprehensible.

"What?" Red presses closer to the bird, coming to stand hip to shoulder. A familiar position to find himself in, their bodies gravitating into place like stray planets around a moon. "What are you trying to say? Calm down a minute, I don't think that was even English."

Duck doesn't answer, just keeps chattering his beak. He starts picking sleek bits of alula off his fingers in quick jerks, letting them flutter aimlessly to the floor. Red has seen him do that once or twice, only when he was deeply bothered by something. Nerves taking over and instincts forcing him into over-preening his feathers, a reaction usually reserved for the worst types of teachers. The ones with leering grins and bloodthirsty eyes, chuckling serenely as they sliced into the soft, unblemished skin of your stomach. Opening you up and letting your inside spill out to the outside, splattering wetly across the floor as shrieks of laughter filled your ears and your vision went black.

Duck was nervous, Red realized. Incredibly, stomach sickeningly, nervous about the party.

"Hey," He soothes, voice slipping even lower. "It's going to be fine. You two are even getting along, for once. Or were, I guess. He's a bit grouchy about being made to make his bed, not that I can blame him." Red bumps him lightly, teasingly. Duck stands, ramrod straight, tail as still as death. "Anyway, you're being awfully nice about this whole birthday thing-"

"Why wouldn't I be?" The bird breaks in, almost casually, but there's a chilly bite in his tone.

"Well… I don't know. You hate when he makes a mess of the house, or lounges around in pajamas… I guess I just expected you to pitch a fit about-"

"You're not the only one that cares about him, you know." Duck breaks in again, voice like ice. He's stopped stirring the mess in the bowl, choosing instead to lean his weight against the counter.

"I never said I was." Red answers slowly, carefully. Fully aware of the way unrelenting stress can ignite the flames of anger in your veins, fear giving way into rage. Into indignation and fury and words pouring out your mouth like fetid water. Unstoppable only after you've said your piece, letting the infection fester and fade as it rushes out in a torrent of nervous energy and babbling away like filth down a drain.

"No, but you imply it. You're always babying him. Like I'd actually do something to him on purpose." Duck is staring intently down into the bowl, hands gripping the counter tightly. Words slipping between his clenched jaw, through the fibrous folds of lamellae. Shoulders tight, voice even tighter. "I wouldn't."

"I- I never meant to imply." The tallest one stumbles over the words, guilt pricking at his hairline, mixing with the beading sweat. "It's just that, with you and him, sometimes- sometimes I worry that things may get…hurtful."

"I know I say…and do *things*... sometimes. But surely you must know, you *both* must know I'd never- I wouldn't do something *real* ." He heaves a sigh, crawling up deep from the depths of his chest. Slowly, he begins to stir the mix again, pouring it out into a few scattered cake pans. "Not the way I would before, when this place was all…" Duck waves his hand around in a frustrated way, unable to verbalize how the house had affected them so violently, but Red knows exactly what he means. "I wouldn't now, not on purpose."

"I know that," Red says, quickly moving to help move the pans to the oven. Easily slipping them from hand to hand to the oven's racks, glowing heat reaching out to bathe wet batter and tease it up into baked mounds of cakey sponge. "I didn't mean anything by it, It was stupid of me to say."

"Yes, you were being stupid. You can't help it I'm afraid, it's in your nature." Duck sighs again, cranking the kitchen timer around to set it, its blue face gazing out curiously at them both. "I just want this whole thing to be perfect." He admits, in an extraordinarily rare moment of openness.

"Why wouldn't this be perfect?" Red chances a nudge, playfully testing the waters. "You're helping me, aren't you?"

"Hush." Duck says, but his tail gives a nearly imperceptible wiggle.

"No, I'm serious. If it weren't for you, he'd be eating a Jaffa Cake with a match in it tonight." He nudges Duck again, smiling sappily. Carrying on like a silly teenager, shameless, all gooey and heart-eyed in the middle of the kitchen. He should probably feel embarrassed, but he truly can't find the energy to care. Along with his newly-realized enjoyment of snacks and sweets, he'd also found his new dynamic with Duck to be very delicious indeed.

"That's true," the avian snorts, nudging the taller one back, forcefully, putting the entirety of his body weight behind his shoulder. Red smiles through the pain, simply happy that Duck's mood was beginning to lift. "You're incredibly useless when it comes to these sorts of things."

"Hmm. True. But do you know what I'm not useless at?"

"What?"

"Being able to reach things higher than the counter." A slow, sharp grin spreads across his face. Eyes bright in the smug way only tall people can be, casually reminding the room of who was vertically challenged and who was not. "Anyway, I'd better go get the bunting."

He keeps grinning as he ambles down the hallway, pausing for a moment in front of the bathroom door. Having to listen hard to hear the sound of water under the echoing tones of Duck's offended shrieks, but it's there. Yellow's still showering then. Usually, he'd be annoyed that the kid was wasting a kiloliter of water every time he used the damn thing, but today, the rising water bill was a blessing. Not that they'd ever paid that.

Anyway, the longer he spent mucking about in the shower, the longer they'd have to set up. And he hadn't even gotten to the bedroom yet, judging by the state of disarray his bed was in. Never before had Red been so happy to see a mess in their room, humming happily as he tugs the bunting and presents out of Duck's trunk, balancing the butcher-papered bundles precariously as he inched his way back out into the hallway. Paper stars held tightly under one arm, bunting wrapped around his neck like a scarf, carefully avoiding the squeaky floorboard as he passed the bathroom door. Yellow's shower more audible now that Duck's done screaming obscenities, his voice carrying through the door with the steam,

singing some song about being neighborly or some other fool thing from one of his kiddie programs. Red smile grows as he passes, the boy didn't suspect a thing.

"There you are," Duck sniffs, cake pans already cooling on the counter. "Took you long enough!"

"Didn't you just put those in?" Red glances out the window, shocked at how low the sun had dipped. Setting the sky ablaze in a showy display of deep pinks and reds and oranges and a thousand different subtle gradients, all sprawling up into the deep blue of the fast-encroaching night.

"I'm not sure. I mean, the timer did go off…" He prods at the spongy texture with a toothpick, checking the dryness of it. "Done already? My, my. Time certainly is moving fast today, must be all the fun we're having."

"Yeah… sure…" Red squints out the window, pondering the quickness of the night. "I'm putting these up now, alright?"

"Alright." Duck answers, distracted. Already flipping the finished cakes out of the pans and onto a large plate, judging by the maroon flecks around the edge it was one of Red's. Rude bugger didn't even ask to use it. As usual. Whatever. He moved on to rifling through the junk drawer, pulling out candles and sinewy bits of white string and rusty push pins and safety pins and needles and broken glass until he finally found what he was looking for: blu-tack.

He'd have to wash his hands when he was done, the sticky mess leaving faintly purple stains on his mitts, like bruises littering pliant skin. Now, he made quick work of it, slapping stars on any available, horizontal surface. Duck had only cut out a handful, enough to have a nice smattering without it being overbearing. He moved quickly, faster than he usually would, time was of the essence, after all. But he couldn't help but think as he worked, thoughts tumbling over and over in his mind like clothes in a washing machine.

Thinking of the act of putting Blu-Tack on stars, of a kindness connected through months and years and decades and eons of time. Of familiar movements, of moments linked in circular meaning, the act of care, a feeling called love. The inkling of which had been growing, even then, in the wetly dark hollow of his chest, allowed now to flourish and flutter. What he'd put out into the universe, that minute niceness, had come back to him ten-fold, returning with the motif of glimmering stars. Small, palm sized, pressed to the cupboards and the walls and, yes, a few on the ceiling. Things change, care grows, hurt lessens, and yet, things will often stay the same.

The bunting goes up in a similarly easy way. Push pins pilfered from the drawer and pierced through soft felt and slightly less-soft drywall. The holes would be dealt with later, if ever, for now the bunting made the kitchen look cheerful. He even managed to extend one or two from the wall and tie them to the pendant light, the cozy form of soft triangles draping across the room, light and airy. High enough that it wouldn't be a problem for the other two, but Red had to duck (ha) as he walked under the garlands.

Happily, he stands back to admire his work, hands on his hips, humming tunelessly to himself. Duck bustles around him, pulling out spatulas and knives and other things from the drawer as he futzes with the cake. It's nearly done now, assembled but missing its final coating. Dotted with dark flecks and oozing a viscous red jelly, layers cemented together and soaking the filling wetly into their sponge. Duck's glaring at the tub of pre-made frosting, face a mix of disgusted and unimpressed with the pink goo.

"These ingredients are disgusting." He says, contempt in his voice. "All chemicals. I feel like a bloody American, eating dyes and lye and plastic or whatever else they put in their food."

"Mechanically separated synthetic blood clots, I suppose."

"Ugh." Duck scoffs, cracking open the tub and swiping a knife through the softened fluff of sugar and god knows what else. "I don't even want to think about it."

"Then don't."

"I'm not!"

"You are," Red ambles over, peering down at the half-frosted cake. Gazing fondly at Duck as he sweats and swears over the pastry, perfectionism out in full force. The death stare he directs at the innocent cake is worse than Red has ever seen him dole out, even to the cruelest of teachers. It was kind of sweet actually, to see how much he really cares about Yellow, in his own, grouchy way. Like an alley cat that had claimed a stupid, yellow kitten as his own, hissing and scratching at his antics but grabbing him by the scruff and toting him away at the first signs of danger.

What?" Duck says, not looking away from the sticky mess of the frosting, fighting to evenly spread it across the cake. "I can feel you staring."

"Nothing, just, I like this." Red sighs, face alight. Well, there was no avoiding it now. "Cooking, with you I mean. And, just, spending time with you. I guess. It's nice to do something nice for- for him. With you. So…yeah."

Duck quietly absorbs the jumble of words, movements stilling, staring at the nearly finished cake with a look of mild surprise. For a moment, he stands there, still, apart from the flick of his tail. Red sends his thanks into the universe for giving the bird that particularly physical tell, certain he'd be dying of embarrassment without the visual barometer of

Duck's good mood. Slowly, Duck continues to spread frosting across the cake, covering the last bit of crumbs and viscous syrup.

"Technically," he says, face suspiciously blank. "I was baking."

"Wha- Huh?"

"I was baking, not cooking. Stupid beast." The words slip easily from the bird's beak, honeyed with a fond amusement, dripping with concealed laughter. "And you didn't really help at all. I did it while you messed about with the bunting."

"Oh my god, forget it!" Red groans, bringing his hands up to cover his burning face. He tries to be sincere one time and the prick has to take the piss. The utter bastard. "I take it back, I actually hate spending time with you. I'd rather live alone in the mountains like a hermit and breed yaks."

"No, you wouldn't!" Duck crows happily, putting the sticky knife down on the counter and turning to gaze up at the taller one. Eyes glittering with delight, a smile twitching its way across his face.

"I wouldn't? Why's that?" Red lowers his hands, eyes dark in the fading light. Blown, black, staring deep into the burning gaze of his shortest housemate. A strange feeling has taken over his chest, squeezing his heart in its heated pressure. For a moment he's absolutely sure something irreversible will happen, something big, with unknowable consequences. His eyes trail Duck's beak, watching idly as a pink tongue darts out, wetting the lip of it. Duck stares back, gaze unbroken, nearly a challenge. Their magnetic connection draws him in, pinning him in place in the twilight haze.

"You'd miss me too much." Duck says, and there's no room for confusion. A matter-of-factness in his voice, an easy lilt to his words. He means what he says, speaking his mind with a blunt precision, as always. Red's heart shudders and shakes, dropping into his gut and causing wave after wave of acid to corrode his stomach lining. It makes him feel hot, and cold, sweat beading and chills overtaking various parts of his body, not at all lessened by the night heat or sprawling expanses of fur that covers him. He can't think of what to say, can't begin to open his mouth, teeth clicking, throat dry as a desert, tongue frozen in place. He grinds his teeth together, voice bubbling in his throat, gaze still locked on the duck's, a quick intake of breath and then-

The bedroom door creaks open, loudly, and the muffled sound of Yellow coming back down the hallway fills the silent room. The shared gaze becomes frantic, panic settling in, when had he left the bathroom? Duck begins to flap his hands frantically, dancing from foot to foot, a look of complete, undiluted horror overtaking his face.

"Oh my god. *Oh my god! What do we do?"* He hisses, words drawn from his throat in a panicked slur. "*DO something!*"

"*Me?"* Red growls back, hunching low, shoulders drawn tight, nearly eye-to-eye with the shortest. "Why me?"

"You're the tallest!"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I don't know, it just does! That's what you get for having stupidly long legs!"

"God! Fine!"

He stands to his full height, turning back and loping out the kitchen and into the hallway. He catches up to the boy quickly, thanks to his aforementioned leg length. Looming over him, using his large frame to block his line of sight, a lumpy wave of red washing its way forward. He lurches towards him in a jerky sort of way, attempting to look nonchalant as he reaches out with grasping hands and a barely-concealed sheen of panic in his eyes. Instantly catching the boy under his arms and drawing him up onto his hip. Ignoring the startled shriek the youngest let out and instead tucking the boy's head under the area where he assumed his chin was, effectively burying his face deep in the swaths of yarn.

Yellow clings to him, hands grappling to hold onto his fur, hair still damp from the shower, smelling of cherries and almonds. Red can't help but tuck him in closer and inhale a deep, satisfying breath, filling his lungs with the multitudes of scents that emanate from the boy. His shampoo, the sticky bar soap he scrubbed with, the lingering scent of meat sauce underneath it all. For a moment, Red forgot his panic, satisfied just to stand in the hallway, the warm weight of Yellow pressing into his hip, senses filled with the pleasant aromas of innocent youth.

"Wha-what's goin' on?" Yellow pants into his neck, body trembling from the rapid change in altitude. "Is something going to- is happening?"

"Nothing's going on," the tallest one soothes, then thinks twice about it. "I mean, it kind of is. Nothing bad though. It's good. I just need you to do something for me, okay?"

"O-Okay." Yellow stutters out, nerves catching at his vocal cords more than usual. "What is it?"

"Keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them."

Yellow shifts in his grasp, huffing quietly to himself, considering the request in his drawn out way. Thoughts trickling in slowly, not that Red minded, the more he stalled the more Duck could get things ready. Finally, he gave a kick with one foot, and nodded into Red's neck, squeezing his arms tighter as he agreed.

"Nothing bad?"

“Nothing bad.”

“Okay, uh, I- I will. Close them and keep ‘em closed. Till you say, or till Duck says?”

“Me, I reckon.” Red answers, dipping his head for another inhale of blue hair. He couldn’t help it, the boy smelled so sweet and clean, he almost wanted to eat him. Or squeeze him and crush him against his chest until he sunk into his very flesh. Or grasp him between his teeth and shake him around until the overwhelming feeling in his heart lessened. Best not to think about whatever that meant.

“Why are you sniffing and- and smelling of me?” Yellow squeaks, burying his face deeper into the warm curve of Red’s shoulder. Legs swaying as Red ambles slowly down the hallway, back into the warm, sweet heat of the kitchen. Sunset casting long, dark shadows on the linoleum, Duck sticking candle after candle from the junk drawer into the sugary mounds of icing. Worry lines smoothing as he saw Yellow’s hidden face, their hard work living on in secret.

“Cause you smell good.”

“Oh… You’re being a weirdo.”

“What? I am not!” Red shakes him, playfully jostling the boy around in his tightly bracketed arms. Grinning as Yellow’s giggles reverberate through his yarn, tickling across his cheeks.

“Are too!” The youngest crows, earlier nervousness already forgotten. Filled with glee at the simple act of being held in the tallest one’s arms, tenderly, like he was a precious object. Toted and boasted and held close to the chest, something worthy of attention, of love.

“I am not,” Red huffs. Smelling his housemate wasn’t weird, was it? It was totally normal to find comfort in his scent, in both their scents. Each a different array of the things that made them, well, *them*. It wasn’t weird at all! Actually, they were the weird ones for thinking it was weird!

“He’s right,” Duck breaks in, startling Yellow. “You’re very odd. A big, weird, lumpy freak, some might say.”

“You shut up,” the tallest snarks at Duck, glaring at him over Yellow’s head. “Whose side are you on anyway?”

“The best side obviously, mine!”

“Ugh, whatever.” He shifts Yellow, gently recapturing his attention. “Now, I’m going to put you in your chair, okay? Remember, don’t open your eyes until I say.”

“Okay,” Yellow says, voice muffled in Red’s yarn. “I will, or- or won’t? Open my eyes, I mean.”

Red doesn’t answer, just untangles the boy from his grasp and deposits him down onto his chair. Chuckling at the sight of high tightly-closed eyes, and the way he slaps both hands over them as soon as he’s free to do so. Swinging his feet, swaying side to side, humming a mindless tune to himself. Completely putting his trust into the other two, Red realizes, not at all afraid of being left, quite literally, blindly exposed in this situation. Fully confident in his safety when left to the devices of his clumpmates, vulnerable and soft, content to sit and wait without knowing what the possible outcome may be. It’s enough to make Red weak in the knees, chest tightening painfully at the realization of how much trust the boy clearly had in them. The old him had never even considered this a possibility, always on edge, on guard, ready for the worst.

Now, he stood in their kitchen, sun shimmering, slipping down below the horizon, crickets and katydids buzzing in the heat. The party they’d put so much effort and time and heart and soul into was nearly complete, orchestrated almost entirely without a hitch, and the small hiccups hadn’t been at all detrimental to the outcome. No, they’d done great, him and Duck. They’d done better than great, they’d done everything Roy had failed at. Keeping Yellow safe, making happy, maybe even making him feel…loved.

“Well?” Duck hisses, startling him out of his thoughts. “Are you just going to stand there like a ninny or are you going to *help?*”

“What do you need help with?” Red grouses back, annoyed at the implication of his non-helpfulness. Honestly, you’d think the duck had put his blood, sweat, and tears into the stupid cake. He probably did. Gross, that’s what he was. Rude and gross. And short. “Can’t lift the- the *thing* with your weak little arms?”

“Ah! Wh-Wh- How DARE you-” Duck splutters, hands on his hips. Tail bobbing, slow and steady.

“No fighting.” Yellow breaks in helpfully, still swaying to the tune that must be running through his head. “You promised.”

“We’re not fighting,” Red groans, matchbook in hand. Having to go through a couple as he lights the candles they’d found in the junk drawer. “We’re, uh, having a discussion. Loudly.”

“Yeah, It’s an adult thing. You wouldn’t understand.” Duck snips out, carefully placing the gifts on the far side of the table, moving slow, ensuring the paper didn’t make noise as he sets them down.

“I’m an adult!” Yellow cries out, attempting to glare from behind his covered eyes. It really didn’t have the desired effect, mostly it made him look like an adorably angry kitten.

“Yeah?” Red grins, tossing yet another burnt match into the open bin. “How old are you?”

Yellow counts to himself for a moment, voice low, breath whistling noisily out of his mouth as he concentrates. Then, he gives a quiet gasp, sitting up taller, as though he'd suddenly remembered the answer.

"Sixty-three!"

"What!" Red barks out a laugh, turning to share an amused look with Duck. "Sixty-three?"

"You are not sixty-three! I'm only twenty-eight!" Duck interjects, trying to hide a smile. He shakes his head, exasperated, annoyed. Conflicting expressions flitting across his face and mixing with the fond look in his eyes.

"Well, I'm only four," Red says, amusement gathering at the corner of his eyes. "I just decided."

"You are NOT four! Shut up both of you! I hate you so much it's actually amazing that my head hasn't popped like a balloon." Duck growls out, the final present relocated to the table. "Now, shall we get started?"

"Started? What does- do you- you mean to say? Or… or are you doing?"

"What? What did he say?"

"I don't know, just help me with the lights, will you?" Red huffs, carefully lifting the cake into the air, head craned back to keep his yarn away from the flames as they licked up from the candles, bundled together and burning at a much more ferocious rate than expected. Then, Duck flicks off the light, plunging the kitchen into relative darkness. The last rays of late-day crawling in the windows, night sounds mixing with Yellow's excited humming, Duck's tail swishing so quickly the change in air currents made the candles flicker and falter.

"Okay," Red said, voice pulling warmly from the depths of his chest. "You can open your eyes now."

Yellow lowered his hands, lips pulling back into a confused wobble as he blinks his eyes rapidly, slowly adjusting his vision to the scene. For a moment, he rubs at them, and Red shares one final look with Duck, happy to see the mix of joy and fear on the shortest one's face mirroring his own feelings in the moment. And then, Yellow's eyes finally focus on the cake, mouth dropping instantly, hanging agape at the sight before him. That's their cue. Red shuffles forward slowly, bringing the cake slowly closer to the boy. Duck follows, one hand clinging to his hip, squeezing twice in quick succession to signal the start of the song.

They sang in tandem, Red's voice a low baritone and Duck's a ridiculously high, strangely pitchy sounding wail. Red carefully places the cake in the middle of the table, encasing them all in the warm, flickering light. Yellow just stares at it, eyes huge and dark, reflecting back a million little prickles of candlelight. They'd stuck the cake full of them, waxy pinks and purples crowding the top of it, unsure of how many would be appropriate.

"*Happy birthdaaaaaaaaay tooooo yooooooooooooou*," Red croons, wincing as Duck hits notes higher than he thought possible. "Make a wish, kid."

"Yes and do start to blow out your candles!" Duck cackles. "We shan't be helping, so you better get to work!"

Yellow sat, still and steady, eyes locked on the dancing light of countless candles. Soft planes of his face covered in a dusting of shadows and the gentle, rhythmic glow of fire buffeted in the breeze. The flickering flames casting his features in a constant, radiant movement. Slowly, he looks up, liquid dark eyes brimmed with confusion, bottom lip beginning to quiver.

"For- for me?" His voice wavers, as if unable to comprehend this small a kindness could be extended to him.

"Of course it's for you," Duck laughs, pushing the cake closer. "We sang the song and everything."

"Come on now," Red encourages, coming around to place a hand on the flat of Yellow's back. Hand resting in the dip between his shoulder blades, no longer boney as they would have been months ago. Now, they were filled in, soft, like the rest of his small body. "Blow out your candles, huh? Then we can turn on the lights, look at your presents, maybe even have a bite of cake. If that's okay with the head chef, that is."

"Obviously it's okay!" Duck squawks, face gleaming verdantly out of the shadows. "Why on earth would I make a cake and refuse to have anyone eat it?"

"F-f-for me?" The boy says again, hands gripping at the front of his overalls, wrapped together, as if cinched in prayer. "A birth-birthday, for me?" Wetness twinkles in his eyes, welling up, spilling over, cutting fat trails down round cheeks. Shining, dimly iridescent, catching the warm candle light in the ghost of glimmering outlines as they drip off his face.

The room is quiet, warm breeze puffing lazily through the open windows. A few candles blow out, smoke trailing up in tendrils of purple and gray. Somewhere, far away, an owl hoots, throaty and deep, harmonizing with the chorus of crickets and the calming thrum of locusts. Red's hand moves in soothing circles, almost on autopilot, round and round, a constant, warm pressure against Yellow's soft back, feeling every little tremor that runs through it. Choked breaths drag in, rush out, lungs crackling around the lump in his throat.

"Yes," Red answers, voice hushed. "Yes, it's for you. We decided, me and him. We decided, and you've got one now. And it won't be complicated to remember, he'll write it in his diary. It's all been worked out, okay?"

"Okay," Yellow warbles out, voice caught between a laugh and a sob. Bringing his hands up to wipe at the tears on his cheeks, the edge of his wrist and the fat of his thumb smearing them uselessly across damp skin, breath hitching once,

twice, before he shuddered and squeaked out a sniffle or two.

"Good Lord," Duck tsked loudly, shuffling forward to stand eye-to-eye with the boy, pulling a crisp hanky from one of his jacket pockets, dabbing at Yellow's face with a practiced ease. His other hand coming up to grasp at his chin, turning his face this way and that, briskly clearing it of tears. "Stop crying this instant. This is your birthday party! You're supposed to be happy, not sad! Honestly, your emotions don't even work right!"

"Hey, don't say that." Red scolds, but his words lack bite. For all their sneaking and planning he'd never expected this to be the outcome, he'd figured Yellow would shriek in excitement and cheer and yell and carry on the way he always did. Tears weren't part of the plan. Though, in hindsight, he guesses they were probably a strong possibility. One they would have considered, if they weren't so caught up in their own excitement over the party. Oh well.

"'M'not sad," Yellow hiccups, one hand clutching the front of his overalls, the other locked on Duck's wrist. "M'not."

"So…these are happy tears?" Red intones, still patting the shivering shoulders beneath his mitt.

"Yeh," Yellow sniffles, face wrinkling as Duck continues to mop at it. "Happy."

Huh, happy tears, happy weight, who knew so many things were able to have so many different meanings? It made Red's brain hurt to think about it actually, how fear and sorrow could be wrung out and replaced with comfort and joy. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

Not that yearned for the days when everything was simple, underscored with needle-sharp anguish and mindless fear. Dulled minds, dulled eyes, blood spilling over the linoleum and wiped away by the start of the next day. Pieces in place, again and again, cleaned and prepped for the next shower of gore, and the next, and the next. No, now he had to deal with laughter and sobs in tandem, the complex intricacies of actually being alive.

"Yes, yes, we're all very happy. I myself would be incredibly happy if you blew out the candles before the wax *ruins* all my hard work." Duck snips out, but there's a wetness gathered at the edges of his own eyes. Beak clicking slowly, like a metronome counting out larghissimo. "And do try not to get your snot all over the cake." He thrusts his handkerchief over Yellow's nose, holding it there expectantly. "Blow."

"I'm not snotty." Yellow snuffles, squirming in Duck's pinching grasp. Leaning into the hanky and feebly clearing his sinuses as Duck glares into the middle-distance, beak twisted in disgust. Red nudges the boy to lean forward, closer to the cake, watching as his face is illuminated in the warm glow of dozens upon dozens of flickering lights.

"Make a wish," Red reminds him, voice low. "Not out loud, or it won't come true."

"Okay," the boy inhales deeply, eyes closed, a look of intense focus smeared across his face. "Okay…I've- I've got it." Another deep inhale, exaggerated and gasping, leaning closer, and then it all whooshes out, extinguishing a good chunk of the candles. Ghostly fingers of pale smoke trailing up, a gray haze filtering up across the ceiling, prickles of orange wick glowing faintly as their flames died.

"Keep going," Red encourages. "You've almost got it."

"Yes, don't be so pathetic!" Duck cries, excitement ringing clear in his voice. "Use your lungs like I do! Remember, deeper breaths are more respectable!"

Yellow sucks in air, breath pulled deep into his lungs, leaning closer, face puckered in concentration. Blowing hard, cheeks puffed out, reddening with the effort from his exhalations. Extinguishing more and more flames with each heaved breath, and then, Duck licks his finger and clamps down on the last, stubborn candle with his pointer and thumb. The room plunging into dusky darkness, twilight crawling its way across the sky. A heavy feeling settles in Red's head, like atmospheric pressure, the electrical thrum air before a storm.

Something changed, he can feel it, in his heart, in the place he assumes would store his soul, if he had one. Deep in the center of his body, organs and blood mixing into a sodden tangle of fat and muscle and membrane, he can feel the weight of it there. The knowledge that there was no returning to the way it'd been before, no slipping back into the easy motions of the past, harsh words and bottle fights long forgotten. Now, there was cake to eat, and a depressed swine to be freed from its butcher paper prison. Kindness would forever mar their interactions, an undercurrent of love slipping into every word, every breath. Not that Red minded.

The lights flick on, blinding, for a moment. Duck harrumphs as he pads back from the switch, already picking half-melted candles from the icing and chucking them into the still-open bin.

"Help me with this, would you?" He snips at Red, tail bobbing fast. "I'd like to get this cut before his *next* birthday, if at all possible."

"Huh? Oh, sure." Red begins to collect the waxy bits of wick in one hand, the other still curved around Yellow's shoulders. He glances down at the boy, taking in the way his eyes are still screwed tightly shut, brows furrowed, mouth clamped. "You can open your eyes now."

"It won't ruin, and- and wreck my wish?"

“No, you should be good now.” The tallest one picks the last candle from the cake, chucking his handful of wax into the bin, underhand. He watches as Duck fusses over the pockmarks in the frosting, plates at the wayside, unnecessarily large knife in hand. “God! Be careful with that!”

“I’m always careful.” Duck says, good-naturedly. Quickly plunging the knife deep in the middle of the cake, cutting a triangle with quick precision, flicking it out onto the awaiting plate with a quick motion. The cake slice flops on its side with a wet plop, leaking viscous red jelly, pale innards flecked with dark bits of bug-shaped sprinkles. Ants and arachnids littering the spongy flesh, pink frosting so sweet it makes Red’s teeth ache just to look at encrusting every free surface of the outer layers.

Duck slides the plate to Yellow, sticking a fork in the sugary shell of pink and red mottled icing. Busying himself with cutting a second and third slice, wordlessly motioning to the fridge with a jerk of his head. A motion Red’s able to translate into a request to retrieve the milk, which he does, grabbing the clean coffee mugs in one hand, bringing the milk carton with the other. The pressure passes, calm sifting its way into the mood, milk frothing in mugs, cold and fatty. Yellow’s legs swinging so fast Red’s surprised he hasn’t fallen out of his chair, tear tracks still etched across his sweet, round face. He sips his milk slowly, soothing his scratchy throat, taking small mouthfuls of cake in between.

“S’so good,” Yellow says through a mouthful, lips and teeth stained red. He’s still misty eyed, sniffling and chewing and wiping his face with long pulls against his forearm. Ignoring Duck’s disgusted shrieks and prideful boastings about the cake in turn. Hand shaking as he extends his fork for another sweet bite. “Thanks. Thank you, for the- for my c-cake.”

“You’re welcome,” Duck answers, pushing a lumpy, brown parcel his way. “But you haven’t even opened your gifts yet, and I put my personal health on the line for them. So, I’d like you to at least look at them. Hopefully before I grow old and grey.”

“Presents?” Yellow wobbles out, lower lip twitching.

“Yes, presents.” Duck pushes one into his hand, a crisp, rectangular bundle that Red suspects is the notebook. “And if you ask if they’re for you I’m going to rip the feathers out of my head, and then I’ll be bald. Do you want me to be bald?” Yellow shakes his head rapidly, clutching the present protectively to his chest. “No? Good. Now open it.”

Red watches, enraptured, taking distracted bites of his cake, which had turned out to be quite good actually. Eyes trailing the way Yellow gently pries the tape from the paper, slipping the ribbon into the front pocket of his overalls. Pulling the book free, eyes bright, darting quickly, studying the glittery design splashed across the front. Pulling it back to his chest, hugging it to his front, face a swirling storm of emotions.

“I love it.” He says, huskily.

“You didn’t even look inside.” Duck sighs, shooting Red a look that reads as *‘can you believe this kid?’*

“Don’t have to. I love it.” Yellow insists, jaw set. Protectively defending the honor of his beloved notebook, even from the person that had gifted it to him.

“Well, that’s great.” Red cuts in, not really expecting a fight, not after Duck’s flash of vulnerability earlier. No, he just wanted to avoid a fifteen minute long conversation where neither participant was willing to back down, ready to maintain their stance till someone’s dying breath. Most likely Red’s, probably of boredom, he was sure. “How about you open another one?”

He shoves another gift into Yellow’s hands, it all but clear now that the boy won’t reach for them himself. It’s larger, rectangular, and smells a bit like rat, so Red knows it’s the crayon box. Yellow slips the ribbon into his pocket again, tenderly freeing the paper from the tape without ripping it, again. Releases a happy coo as he sees the crayons, excitedly flipping it to the back and studying the number of crayons and colors listed. Looking up, excitement brimming with the ghost of tears, smiling with his eyes and his teeth and the soft curve of his cheeks. Red just smiles back and hands him the next gift, the one he’d assumed was the coloring books.

They were the coloring books, it turns out, and the look of pure, undiluted joy on Yellow’s face made up for every bump and scrape and dampened foot from his encounter with the weird, sentient rat hairball in the closet. Duck clearly felt the same way, his beak thrust high in the air, the way it always when he was feeling self-superior, either about gift-picking or food-making or just generally being alive in a way he considered to be more impressive than the other two, which was always. Yellow gets through the deck of cards and Sherbet Lemons quickly after that, each ribbon spirited away into his pocket before the paper was examined. Cooing in delight at each new possession, he’d barely had any before, and now he was up to seven in one night, maybe more if you counted the crayons and cards individually. Which Duck was sure to do with his stupid clipboard.

“Wow!” Yellow crows, bringing the last scrap of cake up into his sugar smeared mouth,lips stained pink and red, teeth surely filmed over from all the sweetness. “I got so much stuffs, and- and things now!”

“Well,” Red says, a little dramatically. Duck’s theatrics really were starting to rub off on him, how unfortunate. “You’ve still got one more to open.” He swishes the pig package out from behind the cake, revealing it now that the other gifts were all open. Depositing it eagerly into Yellow’s empty lap, nearly dancing in excitement. There was that feeling of

having a tail again, thumping, heavy and fast against his legs. Whipping the air around him into an overjoyed frenzy. “Go ahead!”

Slowly, Yellow extracted the ribbon, ignoring the way Duck scoffed as he pocketed it. *What’s he even going to do with those,* was hissed at Red in a stage whisper, which was met in turn with loud shushing, and answered by a loud, annoyed *Hmph!* Yellow worked on, paper crinkling in his hands, before a hushed gasp escaped his lips as sad, pink plush was exposed. Moving faster, tearing butcher paper free with an excited fervor, Yellow was brought face to face with the pig. A low keening noise tumbled from his lips, eyes blown wild and glassy, hands shaking with the overwhelming emotions coursing through his slight body.

“*Ohhh…*” He breathed, bringing one hand up to pet its floppy head. “Pig.”

“Yes, it’s a pig. And *yes* , it’s for you.” Duck cuts in, sipping his milk haughtily. Answering the boy’s question before he could even begin to form the words in his throat, seemingly fed up with his constant disbelief. Yellow continues to stare at it, running his hands across its slumped body before carefully pulling it into his lap. It’s slack body nearly dwarfing his own, it’s cubic head tucked under his chin. His arms drawn around the thing, tightening slowly, gripping it to his front. He’s sniffling, quietly, not fully crying again but on his way there.

“Hey,” Red nudges him, reaching across the table to pat his shoulder. Shifting himself closer to the other two, jostling Duck forward in turn. Their chairs crowded together, facing each other now more than the table. “That’s a very nice pig. What are you gonna name it?”

“Her name?” Yellow sniffs, wiping one eye with a trembling fist. “Her name is, uh, is…Doggie.”

“Doggie? But it’s not a dog, it’s a hog.” Duck grouses, arms crossed. “You’re terrible at names.”

“Mate…” Red groans, nudging him with his elbow. Gentler this time, lesson learned from their last almost-fight. “He can name her whatever he wants.”

“Doggie,” Yellow pipes in, stubbornly. “She’s Doggie.”

“Okay, okay, alright.” The avian huffs, fiddling with something in his pocket. “You can name the stu-” He breaks off, breathing quickly in and out of his nose. And then, starts again, speaking slower, annoyed timbre missing from his voice. “You can name *her* …Doggie. If you want.” He’s still got one hand sunk deep in his jacket pocket, knuckles bunching the fabric there, as if rolling something around and around in his closed fist. His beak clicks, softly, and his eyes are far away.

“What’ve you got there?” Red nudges him again, resting his hand on the shortest one’s leg, tenderly. Knowing that two acts of vulnerability in one day would probably be too much for him to act on alone, he gives him a few supportive pats. And if he leaves his hand there, warm and heavy, slowly circling around the scaly knee, that’s his business, isn’t it?

“What? Oh, uh, nothing. It’s nothing.” He keeps fiddling with whatever it is, eyes downcast. “It’s just. It’s something. Well- I thought you’d like-” He’s glaring at Yellow now, expression mismatched from the faltering nerves in his voice. “Ehh! Here! You soft-headed ninny. Don’t say I’ve never given you anything!” Duck draws his hand out of his pocket and thrusts it into Yellow’s grasp, nearly knocking Doggie askew.

Yellow peers down into his cupped hands, Doggie squished between his left forearm and his chest, expression unreadable. He slowly trails his eyes across the object, taking it in, lips moving in silent wonder. He stares at it for a long moment, and then, his eyes snap up to Duck, fat tears brimming up and pooling over, re-wettening his previously dried cheeks. He hiccups, once, twice, before breaking down fully into tears, his body too tired to hold them back for a third time in a row. Cradling his hands close to his chest protectively, breaths loud, eyes bloodshot.

“Hey, whoa! What did he give you?” Red asks, casting a panicked look at Duck. The bird simply shrugs, appearing almost bashful. It was an emotion that Red had never seen him express before, which was strange, seeing as they’d known each other for the past couple of years, and also, their entire lives.

Yellow thrusts his hands forward, Doggie slumping down pathetically on his lap, sniffling and breathing thickly through his mouth. In his outstretched palms lay a rock. A rather pretty rock, all white quartz and craggy bits of sediment, flecked through with black speckles. It’s round, softened with age and the never-ending currents of whatever river Duck had fished it out of, comfortably filling Yellow’s hand. A good sized rock, just the right weight and shape to fidget with, smoothly rotating it over and over again in your hand. Heavy, smooth, and fist-sized. It was perfect.

Red cast his gaze back to Duck, eyes lidded, a heartbreakingly soft smile fluttering across his face. Duck ignored them both, hiding his face behind his empty mug, pretending to take a long sip of milk. Yellow kept sniffling, shuddering out heartbreaking little sounds, carrying on until it all became too much for Red. He shifts forward, grasping Yellow under both arms and tugging him into his lap, settling him there with Doggie.

“That’s a very wonderful Rock, huh?” He says, voice grumbling low, reverberating through his chest. Yellow buries his face in Red’s neck, nodding wordlessly, Doggie flopping pathetically across Red’s knee. “He’s never even let me look at his rocks, let alone have one.”

“Hush.” Duck grumbles, but he reaches out to steady Doggie, ensuring her continued safety on Red’s knee rather than letting her tumble to the floor.

“No, I mean it. I must admit, I’m very jealous.”

“We- we can share,” Yellow hiccupped, tears slowing. Rubbing his wet face into the tendrils of yarn, heaving out a tired sigh. “It c’n be the family rock.”

“But it’s your present. Surely, you’d want to keep it to yourself, eh?” Red jiggled his knee, jostling the boy into soft giggles. “It’s your birthday, you’re allowed to be greedy.”

“No, he isn’t!” Duck squawks. “He’s to be polite. Even on his birthday! It’s good manners.”

“So says the least mannered member of the family.”

“I am VERY mannered, how dare you!”

“You bite people!”

“Only when they deserve it! Maybe if you behaved less like a neanderthal I wouldn’t have to bite you!” Duck sniffs, arms crossed. His tail makes a dull thudding noise against the backrest of his chair, and there’s a constant, undeniable sparkle of pride in his eyes.

Of all their little spats, Red would remember this one most fondly. Here in the kitchen, the warm press of Yellow in his lap, laughter smeared with the remnants of tears. The weight of his whole world leaning into his shoulder, the rest of it seated close by. Still pretending to sip milk from an empty mug, incredibly embarrassed by his own openness. His gift, a physical reminder of how truly thoughtful he could be. How loving. And, of course, Doggie, draped across his free knee, internal stuffing shifting down to her extremities. Dangling sadly, expression pitiful, the perfect picture of the world's most miserably square hog.

They’d had a birthday for Yellow, a bloody good one, if you’d asked Red. Not-so-expertly concocted and carried out in late-night closet plundering and bum-indenting bunting mishaps. A day filled with summer smells, summer sounds, void of teachers and filled with happy tears. A day with cake, saccharine sweet scum lining every inch of Red’s mouth, his teeth aching from the sugar. A day with a pig, and a rock, and friends slipping closer and closer into something that could be described as a family. No longer could Red wave away their connection to each other, his lawyer having clump explanations worked fine when they were simply housemates. But now, sitting here, happy and fat from the meals they shared, lap occupied, heart bursting with joy, it wasn’t that simple.

Yellow’s party ended shortly after the rock reveal, but the birthday feeling lived on, deep in the hollow of Red’s gut. Swirling around and around, heating his blood and igniting his brain. A permanent, euphoric thrill thrumming through his veins. They’d pulled it off, and it had been perfect. Everything, the decorations, the cake, the presents, even the weather. They’d done everything Roy had failed at, and they’d aced it. He felt properly chuffed, washing the dishes with an uncharacteristic pep in his step. He even whistles a tune, which was hard, due to his lack of lips, but he’d kept it up until Duck ordered him to stop.

Yellow sat back in his own seat, Doggie in one arm, his rock on the table. Happily flipping through his coloring books, oohing and aahing over a blank illustration of Saber-Toothed tiger eating a large deer thing, puddles of hueless blood covering the scene. Duck seemed to share in his excitement, trotting around the kitchen, putting away dishes, tail a blur of green feathers and air. He didn‘t even complain when Red had declared Yellow as free from chore duty for the night, being the birthday boy and all.

Together, they made quick work of the cleanup, him and Duck. Working in tandem, easy, habitual, quickly falling into wordless synchronization. Wrapping leftover cake in cling film, binning butcher paper, Duck snippily ordering Yellow to go brush his teeth, Red chiming in with softer tones to remind him to wash his face. Slotting together, like pieces of a puzzle, one’s strength the other’s weakness and vice versa. They just fit.

Red busies himself with gathering Yellow’s gifts, the boy having left them behind on his trek to the bathroom, Doggie and the rock still held tightly in his grip. Duck watching idly as he gathered them up, one foot tapping a lazy rhythm. He holds out a hand, and Red slips the packet of cards into it. They amble into the bedroom together, again, their agreements unspoken. It was almost as if they had learned to communicate telepathically sometime in the last few weeks-months-years of their life together. Securely locked in as something closer than clumpmates, slipping easily into friendship, maybe even deeper. But there was no time to ponder that now, or, at least that’s what Red told himself. They were much too busy putting away Yellow’s new belongings, filling his near-empty trunk with his birthday bounty.

And then, Yellow padded into the room, Doggie and rock in tow, leaving room for Red to abscond to the bathroom. He preferred to brush his teeth without an audience, and after tonight, they needed a thorough scrubbing. He hummed as he brushed, staring into the mirror, hardly recognizing the great, scarlet beast that stared back. Round, limbs fattened with time, with family meals and sugary snacks. Days spent basking in the sunshine while Yellow faffed about in the scraggly patch of weeds and wildflowers they called a garden, soaking in the warm air. He looked happy now, and he smiled more often than not.

Before, he always wondered what his family thought of his tendency to smile, shamefully pinching his expression back into something more neutral. But now, he knew exactly what his family thought. Yellow liked his teeth, said they

looked just like stalanamites'n'tights, and Duck had launched into a lecture about the merits of properly pronouncing your words. They didn't scold when he grinned, didn't pressure him into taking up less space, hunching down into a wiry curve of anxious energy. Now, he filled up every room he was in, all soft curves and hulking height.

He rinsed, then flossed, then rinsed again. Flicking the light off, backtracking to do so in the kitchen as well, leisurely walking down the darkened hallway and into the bedroom. Met with the sight of Duck sat on Yellow's bed, legs dangling, critiquing the Very Hungry Caterpillar's eating habits and how absolutely rude he was acting. Red pauses, taking in the way Yellow was snuggled under his duvet, Doggie's face peeking out from beneath his chin. His rock placed squarely on his nightstand, reflective bits sparkling in the lamplight. Honestly, it was all too adorable, he might vomit, especially after all the cake he'd ingested earlier. Duck flicks his gaze up at him, brows high, face twisted into an exasperatedly fond smile. Ah, fuck, that was cute too.

Red listens attentively to Duck's voice as he finishes the story, lecturing Yellow on the dangers of eating too many sweets, stumbling over the pronunciation of *butterfly*, whatever that was. He straightens his covers, still messy from the morning, and glances up at Duck as he closes the book and reshelves it. Yellow starts to snore, already slipping into sleep. The excitement of the day and his sugar crash finally catching up to him, mouth open, drooling onto Doggie's cubic head. Duck quirks a brow, and all Red can think to do is wave, heat flushing his newly rounded cheeks.

"That's all you have to say? After the day we've had?" Duck throws his hands in the air, voice a stage whisper.

"I didn't say anything!"

"Shut up," Duck shuffles his way up to Red's bed, nightshirt swinging in tempo with his steps. "You know what I meant."

"I do," Red settles on the side of his mattress, bringing him and Duck as close to eye level as they can get without him kneeling down. "Unfortunately."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means I spend too much time with you," Red grins, wrinkles gathering around his eyes. "I've begun to understand your speech patterns."

"Well, you should! I have the best speaking voice in the house! It's so loud, and authoritative." Duck puffs his chest out a bit, voice pompous. "I have the best lungs you know."

"If you say so."

"I do!"

"Okay." Red says, gazing down at him, eyes soft. "Anyway, I'd say today was quite the success."

"All thanks to me!"

"All thanks to you? I hung up the decorations!"

"I baked the cake! And I traversed the closet for gifts!"

"We did that together, you dolt."

"Oh, yeah. Well… I cut out the stars!"

"And I made the bunting." Red groans, rubbing his temple. "Can't we share credit for the party? It was clearly a joint effort."

"Ehh… I suppose so." Duck sighs, but there's a curve of a smile on his face, flashbulb bright. "Ride my coattails, if you must…" He yawns then, face cracked wide, a flash of pale-pink tongue squirming in his mouth. Red's stomach squirms in turn, he chooses to ignore this lest he spiral into embarrassment and self-consciousness. "We did amazing," Duck says, breaking through Red's thoughts. "Didn't we?"

"We did perfect," Red answers, pride dripping from his every word. "We did everything that useless lump of flesh couldn't."

"Yes, I do believe you're right." Duck's beak is up so high he's almost staring at the ceiling, a smug smile firmly locked in place. "*Fucking* amazing, one might say."

"I agree," Red yawns. "Fucking amazing."

"Well…I suppose I'm off to bed." Duck stands there, suddenly awkward in a way he usually isn't. Picking at his finger feathers, rocking on the balls of his feet. "I, uh, I- I hadfuntoday."

"Huh?"

"I had f-fun today. Goodnight."

"Oh, goodnight." Red says to his retreating back, watching him scuttle across the room. And then, he calls after him, voice teasing. "I had fun with you too."

Duck doesn't answer, just flicks on Yellow's nightlight, and kills the overhead, plunging the room into darkness. Red laughs to himself as he climbs under his duvet, settling down, gaze directed at the ceiling. Calm falling over him as he stares up at the green-yellow glow of phosphorus plastic stars. His nightly companions, along with his thoughts, now a nearly symbolic representation of his proclivity for kindness. Once, a flaw, something that would only lead to more harm.

A soft spot, a target for teachers to more accurately bring about harm. Taking advantage of his soft heart, his sympathetic nature. He'd tried to tell himself he wasn't kind, back then, as he'd ignored his housemates' hurts and traumas. Staring on, blankly watching as they withered and wasted in their chairs. But the stars knew otherwise, casting the room in a calm glow. Deep down, he was kind, and it was drawn nearer and nearer to the surface of his skin every day.

Old softie, as Duck said. Big, and comfy, as Yellow said. The plastic stars said nothing. Only now, as he drifted closer and closer to sleep, Red wondered where Yellow had gotten them in the first place. blu-tack in hand, pleas on his lips. Duck certainly hadn't given them to him, and it wasn't Red. Odd. The thoughts dripped slowly, like brewing coffee, his eyes slipped closed. His last view of the day was the green smear of stars, twinkling down at him, dimming as the night went on. Ready, for the morning sun, for the cycle of days to march on and on.

Far away, a Nightjar chatters on, voice harmonizing with the wind.

Inside, a family sleeps on. Whole, for the first time.

Notes:

The monogrammed plates/mugs idea came from a lovely ask I received on my tumblr, here: https://myshredda.tumblr.com/post/701824543815335936/reading-your-fic-gave-me-the-cutest-idea-ive-ever

Here's a refresher for what Doggie looks like: https://myshredda.tumblr.com/post/701383790437826560/reference-image-for-the-fic

Here's what Duck's lovely rock looks like: https://myshredda.tumblr.com/post/702653474046869504/another-image-that-will-make-sense-in-a-bit-o

I hope you enjoyed coming on this multi-chaptered journey with me! See you in the next fic!

Series this work belongs to:

- ← Previous Work (http://archiveofourown.org/works/42872529) Part 5 of home is where I want to be, but I guess I'm already there (http://archiveofourown.org/series/3179772)

Close (#)